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ABSTRACT

This handbook offers guidance to teachers for obtaining and evaluating feedback on courses and programs of study at institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom and South Africa. Part 1 examines the purposes and functions of feedback, defines key terms, and summarizes key steps in the feedback process. Part 2 discusses the preparation needed for the evaluation process, including clarifying the context, focusing feedback accurately, and identifying topics to be addressed, such as course aims and structure, teaching, assessment, course management, and students' responses. Part 3 examines sources and methods, specifically methods for obtaining and evaluating feedback from within the course team, from students, from external colleagues and peers, and incidental feedback. For each group of sources, individual methodologies are described and response sheets encourage the user to relate the methodology to his or her own course/program. Part 4 discusses analyzing outcomes and acting on findings. Specific subsections address: analyzing data (both closed and open-ended); interpreting findings; consulting on feedback; acting on findings and communicating outcomes. Many examples illustrate the processes discussed. (Contains 24 references.) (DB)

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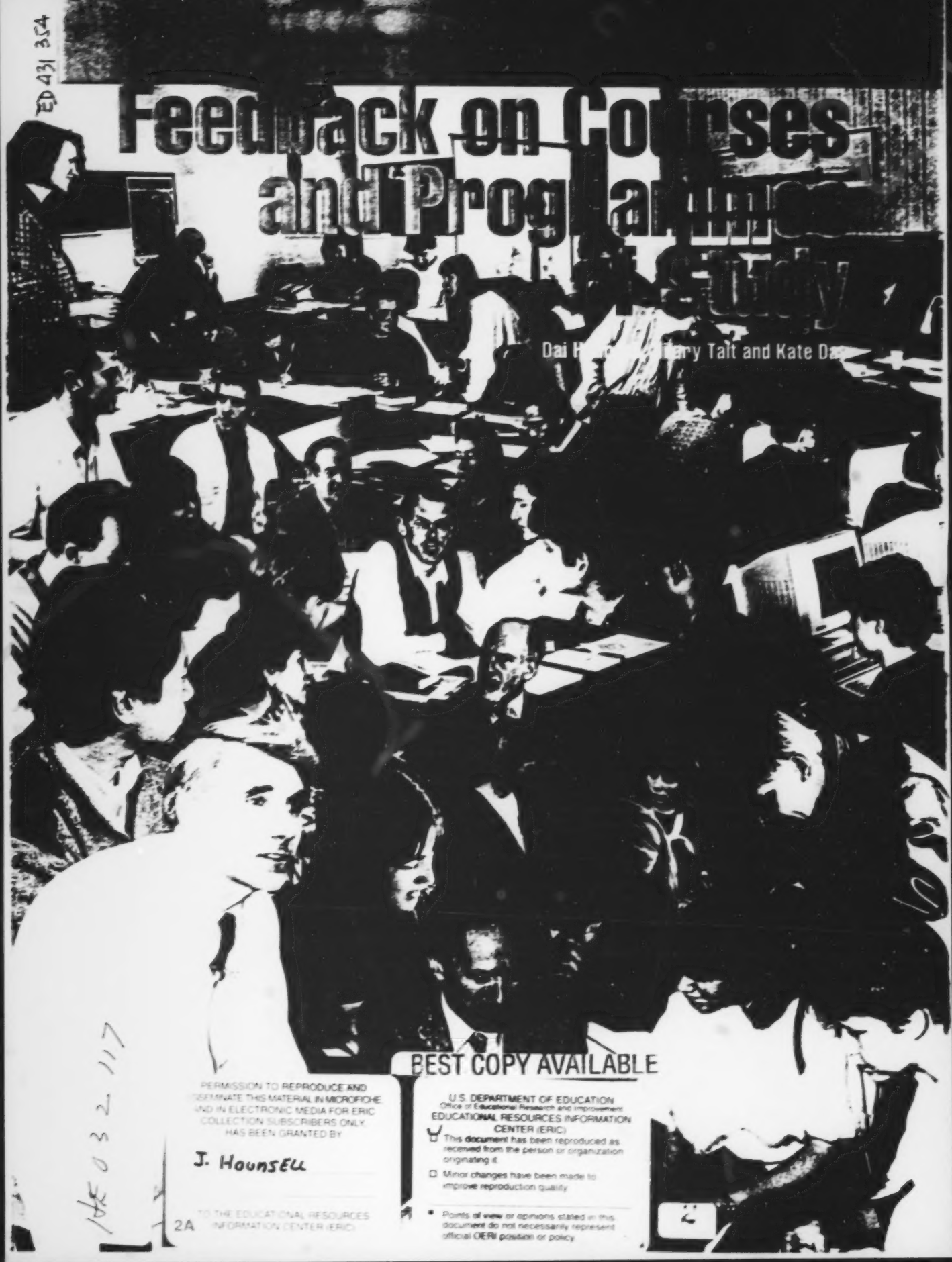
Feedback on Courses and Programmes

Dai H... Mary Tait and Kate Da...



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A HANDBOOK

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Dai Hounsell, Hilary Tait and Kate Day

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5

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Contents

Part 1	**Feedback Purposes and Functions**	1
	Introduction	3
	Why Get Feedback?	4
	Some Key Terms	5
	What Makes for Good Practice?	6
Part 2	**Groundwork and Focus**	7
	Introduction	9
	Clarifying the Context	10
	Focussing Feedback Accurately	16
	What Topics Need to Be Addressed?	18
Part 3	**Sources and Methods**	33
	Introduction	34
	Feedback from Within the Course Team	35
	Feedback from Students	39
	Feedback from External Colleagues and Peers	65
	Incidental Feedback	72
Part 4	**Outcomes and Action**	73
	Overview	75
	Analysing Data	76
	Interpreting Findings	83
	Consulting on Feedback	88
	Acting on Findings	92
	Communicating Outcomes	97
	References	105
	Further Reading	107

Part 1: Feedback Purposes and Functions

Introduction	3
Why Get Feedback?	4
Some Key Terms	5
What Makes for Good Practice?	6

Introduction

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, the practice of seeking regular feedback on courses and programmes of study has gradually become firmly established throughout higher education. What was once the predilection of an enthusiastic few has now become accepted routine for the great majority of university and college teachers.

Undoubtedly this sea-change has been to a significant extent externally driven. With the advent of quality audit and quality assessment, departments and institutions alike have been compelled not simply to articulate the standards they espouse, but to explain how they go about ascertaining that these standards have actually been achieved. The stimulus to change, however, has not been wholly external in its origins. Growing numbers of academic staff have begun to see feedback as an integral element in any effective teaching strategy, and therefore essential in its own right, whatever the external pressures might be.

CHANGING APPROACHES TO FEEDBACK

Accompanying this shift, there have been encouraging developments in approaches to feedback. The ubiquitous 'evaluation questionnaire' once had an almost talismanic status regardless of its appropriateness in a given course setting. Nowadays, however, it is increasingly seen as one amongst a much-enlarged array of possible feedback methods. Secondly, an early preoccupation with student-derived feedback (predicated on the assumption that students were the sole 'clients' and thus uniquely equipped to comment on any and every aspect of course provision), has given way to a more judicious concern with information from a diversity of sources. And thirdly, the sometimes prevalent notion that the chief function of feedback is purgative (i.e. to enable students to let off steam) has thankfully proved short-lived. It is now widely acknowledged that feedback which does not lead to action is neither worthwhile nor credible.

THE AIMS OF THIS HANDBOOK

The aim of this handbook is to assist new and experienced colleagues alike to make use of feedback in the most appropriate, constructive and economical ways possible, drawing on a large variety of examples of contemporary good practice. It deals with the various complementary sources of feedback and outlines the many possible methods which can be adopted. At the same time, it considers feedback in-the-round, exploring how feedback on courses and programmes of study can be systematically sought, analysed, acted upon and disseminated.

FORMAT AND LAYOUT

Since almost anyone looking at the handbook will have had some prior experience of feedback on a course or study programme, the handbook has been designed with this in mind. The format followed should make it possible for any reader to skim and scan, passing quickly over those aspects of feedback which are already well-known to him or her, while homing in on those which may be new and unfamiliar. Every effort has also been made to position examples and other illustrative materials alongside the text which refers to them.

Why Get Feedback?

CONTEXT

The quality of the higher education which students experience is influenced by a complex range of factors which include, on the one hand, their own characteristics, commitment and effort, and on the other, the departmental and institutional setting in which learning takes place. At the heart of their educational experience, however, lie the various individual courses they follow and the wider programmes of study of which these are part. These offer students a systematic grounding in a body of knowledge and the skills and procedures associated with it, while also helping to prepare students for the world of employment beyond graduation. Monitoring and evaluating courses and programmes of study on a regular basis therefore plays a crucial role in sustaining and assuring the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate education.

PURPOSES

Against this background, seeking feedback on a course or programme of study has two principal and interrelated purposes:

- to ascertain how well a course or programme of study is doing, and thus to evaluate the extent to which it meets its stated aims and objectives or learning outcomes;
- to identify both its chief strengths and its main weaknesses (neither of which may necessarily be those most readily perceived by the course team) so that its strengths can be appropriately acknowledged and capitalised upon, while its weaknesses can be remedied or at least ameliorated wherever possible within the constraints of staffing, timetabling, facilities and other resources.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Pursuing these twin purposes also means that those responsible for the course or programme can establish how far they have been successful in addressing the differing needs and requirements of various client-groups or 'stakeholders', to whom they are in certain respects accountable. These needs and requirements are likely to embrace some or all of the following:

- the expectations and aspirations of the students enrolled;
- departmental, faculty and institutional guidelines on teaching policies, procedures and practices;
- the ethos, values and conventions of the discipline(s) or field(s) of study concerned;
- the standards set by agencies such as the Funding Council, the Research Councils, the Higher Education Quality Council and those professional or vocational bodies which have responsibilities for accrediting relevant courses and programmes of study.

Some Key Terms

Throughout this handbook we make use of a number of terms which have often had distinctively different meanings for different individuals or institutions and which may therefore give rise to confusion. As used in this handbook, then, the key terms *course*, *programme of study*, *course team*, *feedback* and *evaluation* are defined as follows.

COURSE

Course is employed as a broad-brush term to refer to any discrete and relatively self-contained course unit, module, or curriculum option, each of which is likely to be characterised by a particular content and structure, specific methods of delivery (a combination of lectures, tutorials, practicals and private study, say, or a set of learning-teaching) and a particular approach to assessment. Any one course may in some instances form part of a single *programme of study*, but more usually a particular course can be followed as a valid or permissible option within any of a number of different study programmes.

PROGRAMME OF STUDY

By *programme of study* is meant the broader scheme of studies which any given student is likely to be following and which leads to a named degree qualification (e.g. BSc in Electrical Engineering, MA Hons in German and Business Studies, Diploma in Social Work). Any particular programme of study is normally made up of a specified number of courses, course units, modules or options, which are drawn from one or more disciplines or fields of study and which often combine core or compulsory courses with a range of options from which students can choose.

COURSE TEAM

A *course team* comprises all those individuals involved in a significant way in the design, teaching and assessment of a particular course or programme of study. The core of the team is usually made up of the lecturers, tutors and demonstrators for the course or programme concerned, but may well also include technicians, course secretaries, librarians, computing officers and other relevant support staff, especially where the latter play a crucial role in contributing to its overall quality.

FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

The term *feedback* is applied here to any information which is gathered, collated or reviewed (by various methods and from different sources) as part of an attempt to establish the effectiveness of a course or programme of study. *Evaluation*, by contrast, is intended to refer to the process by which all the various feedback information assembled is systematically scrutinised and weighed in coming to a rounded overall judgement of effectiveness.

It follows that while students, internal and external colleagues and peers can provide *feedback*, it is normally only the course team directly concerned which is in a position to undertake the process of *evaluation* of the feedback findings.

What Makes for Good Practice?

As the activity of seeking and responding to feedback on courses and programmes of study has become increasingly well-established in higher education, so too has it become possible to attempt a fresh definition of what makes for good practice in this fast-evolving area, and it is this which has shaped and underpins the present Handbook.

Contemporary good practice, at base, entails following a series of interrelated steps which begin with building up a well-rounded picture of the workings of a course and culminate in taking action to implement and communicate whatever changes might be called for.

The specific steps involved are as follows:

FOCUS Gathering information that relates to the various relevant aspects of a given course or programme which the course team wishes to scrutinise.

These may include, for instance: course aims, objectives, content, structure and organisation; teaching and learning methods; student guidance and support; assessment procedures and strategies; and course organisation and administration.

SOURCES Seeking and collating feedback that reflects the different perspectives and interests represented.

This will generally entail obtaining feedback from all members of the course team, from the students taking the course or programme, and from colleagues and peers outwith the course team.

METHODS Deploying a blend of feedback methods which will adequately encompass these aspects and perspectives, but which will nevertheless not call for undue effort or expense.

ANALYSIS Processing and analysing the information gathered in a systematic yet economical way which will do justice to the full range of comments and responses elicited.

INTERPRETATION Pinpointing accurately and equitably both the achievements and strengths of a course and any issues and concerns that might need to be addressed by the course team.

ACTION Exploring what action could and should feasibly and realistically be taken.

This in some cases may involve consulting with students as well as with course team colleagues.

DISSEMINATION Summarising feedback findings together with any agreed action to be taken, and communicating these outcomes both to students and to relevant colleagues and peers.

MONITORING Taking steps to ensure that the impact of any changes introduced as a consequence of feedback will be carefully monitored.

Part 2: Groundwork and Focus

Introduction	9
Clarifying the Context	10
Focussing Feedback Accurately	16
What Topics Need to Be Addressed?	18
a. Course Aims, Content and Structure	19
b. Teaching	20
c. Learning and Studying	22
d. Assessment	24
e. Course Organisation and Management	26
f. Background Variables	28
g. Students' Overall Response	30

Introduction

In this part of the booklet, we look at a set of issues which are often overlooked. These consist of the kinds of groundwork and sound preparation which are almost always an essential preliminary to consideration of feedback sources and methods. If this groundwork is skimped, the overall strategy followed is unlikely to be well-targetted and may fail to make the most effective use of the resources which are to hand.

Three questions are discussed, as outlined below.

CLARIFYING THE CONTEXT Reflection on your purposes in seeking feedback and the implications of these, particularly if your purposes include meeting the requirements of institutional or external quality assurance procedures.

FOCUSSING FEEDBACK Deciding what your precise focus for feedback will be: a wide-angle view of a course, for example, or a close-up examination of a much more specific issue or set of concerns.

WHAT TOPICS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED? Reviewing the topics which feedback ought to address, given how the course is constructed as well as how it is taught and assessed. These topics therefore range widely and include:

- the aims, content and structure of the course or programme of study being looked at;
- the teaching methods adopted;
- expectations and assumptions about students' learning and studying;
- the approaches taken to assessing what students know and are able to do;
- how the course or programme is organised and managed;
- the varied backgrounds which the students enrolled bring to the course or programme of study;
- students' overall response to the course or programme.

PRIORITIES AND PACING As you work through these topics, it will soon become apparent that the number of questions which might be raised in relation to any course or programme is potentially very large. Some prioritising is therefore usually essential if your feedback strategy is not to overburden you, your colleagues and your students. Pacing is also a key consideration. What questions can most opportunely be asked at what successive points in the course, whether in the interests of spreading the load or of being in a position to respond effectively to pressing concerns? Seeking feedback only at the end of a course rarely convinces students that their views are going to be taken seriously.

It is possible you have already made some decisions about how you might collect feedback, and from whom. If this is the case, and you are confident that the groundwork is already in place, you may want to leap-frog this part of the booklet and go straight to ***Part 3: Sources and Methods of Feedback.***

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Clarifying the Context

PURPOSES AND PROCEDURES

As we saw in Part 1 of this handbook, while feedback is generally sought to fulfil the twin purposes of ascertaining how well a course or programme is doing and building on the strengths and weaknesses identified, there are also likely to be requirements for wider accountability to be met.

In some instances, the concern of a course team to collate and review feedback may coincide with imminent internal or external demands, in which case there is everything to be gained by devising a strategy which will achieve as much as is possible simultaneously. But even if, say, an external assessment of teaching quality or a professional accreditation visit is two or three years' distant, it makes good sense to ensure that the course team's needs for feedback and those arising from formal internal and external procedures are broadly aligned, even though they need not match in every respect. This will in turn call for you to make sure you are familiar with current procedures.

INTERNAL PROCEDURES

Identifying what is required for internal quality assurance procedures such as Curriculum Approval, Course Monitoring and Programme Review should be be relatively straightforward, particularly if they are based on a standard checklist or pro forma of the kind illustrated over the next four pages. A further useful starting-point is to look at monitoring and review submissions for previous years. These should help you take stock of what kinds of feedback have been sought in the past as well as alerting you to issues that may need to be followed up.

EXTERNAL REQUIREMENTS

It is not possible to make any general observations here about the the requirements of professional accreditation, since these vary very widely from one accrediting body to another. However, printed information about quality assessment is readily available from the Higher Education Funding Councils (see for example, SHEFC, 1996) and takes the form of guidance on the process and scope of assessments generally, published assessment reports (grouped by 'cognate' or subject area) and annual reports and reflections. Overleaf (p. 15) is an extract from one Funding Council's quality assessment framework.

Guidelines both on quality audit and on general issues of good practice in teaching are published by the Higher Education Quality Council, along with audit reports on individual institutions (HEQC, 1996). For a very helpful overview of audit and assessment, see Gordon and Partington (1995).

AN EXAMPLE OF A COURSE MONITORING PRO FORMA

COURSE MONITORING FORM: HONOURS COURSES

(In this context "course" means any unit of teaching which is recognised as having a discrete credit value within any Honours curriculum)

Department:	**Session:**
Title of Course:	**Course Organiser:**
Credit Value:	

A-1 STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE COURSE

	GRADUATING STUDENTS	NON-GRADUATING STUDENTS
ENROLMENT BY 1st NOVEMBER		
WITHDRAWN		
NOT REQUIRED/ PERMITTED TO TAKE EXAM (Non-Grads)		
EXEMPTED/NOT REQUIRED TO TAKE EXAM		
NON-DP STUDENTS		
TOTAL TAKING EXAMINATION		

This Course Monitoring Form was devised for use in the Faculty of Arts, University of Edinburgh

AN EXAMPLE OF A COURSE MONITORING PRO FORMA - CONTINUED

A-2 FINAL EXAMINATION GRADES

	SINGLE HONOURS	JOINT HONOURS	NON-GRADUATING (if exam taken)
I			
II:1			
II:2			
III			
Fail			

A-3 If assessed coursework/continuous assessment (other than dissertation) is part of degree classification, state relative proportion:

COURSEWORK .....%

EXAMINATION .....%

A-4 COURSEWORK GRADES AWARDED TO NON-GRADUATING STUDENTS

I (Grade A)	
II:1 (Grade B)	
II:2 (Grade C)	
III (Grade D)	

A-5 COMMENTS OF HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

17

AN EXAMPLE OF A COURSE MONITORING PRO FORMA - CONTINUED

COURSE MONITORING FORM

Section B: Course Appraisal

Department:	**Session:**
Title of Course:	**Course Organiser:**

B-1 SOURCES OF FEEDBACK

How were course contributors (lecturers, tutors and part-time tutors) consulted?

Individual Consultation	
Group Discussion	
Written Submission	

How were students involved in course appraisal?

Questionnaire	
Tutorial Discussion	
Staff-Student Committee	

What aspects of the course were considered in appraisal?

ASPECTS OF COURSE	COURSE TEACHERS	STUDENTS	EXTERNAL EXAMINER	OTHER
CONTENT & STRUCTURE				
TEACHING & LEARNING METHODS				
ASSESSMENT METHODS				
ORGANISATION & ADMINISTRATION				

AN EXAMPLE OF A COURSE MONITORING PRO FORMA - CONTINUED

B-2 COMMENT BRIEFLY ON THE FOLLOWING:

1. What changes were made to the course as a result of feedback reported last year?

2. Analysis of questionnaires and other student input: strengths of the course and aspects needing further attention.

3. Comments of the External Examiner

4. What action is the Department taking with respect to 2. and 3.?
   (How and when will this be done?)

5. What course materials were given to students?

B-3 DISSEMINATION OF THE RESULTS OF FEEDBACK

	YES	NO
STAFF		
STUDENTS		
EXTERNAL EXAMINER		

B-4 COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Signature of Course Organiser..... Date.....

GUIDELINES ON TEACHING QUALITY (EXTRACT)

H. Student Support

H.1 The need of all students for guidance and support is recognised and provision made for advice and assistance in the curricular, vocational and personal domains.

H.2 Responsibility for particular aspects of student support is clearly located and effective liaison maintained between arrangements at course / department level and institution-wide services.

H.3 Adequate provision is made for information and advice to potential students during the application and enrolment phases.

H.4 Adequate provision is made for support for students who have physical disabilities or disabilities which lead to specific learning difficulties.

H.5 Students are effectively supported during their studies by systems of induction, course tutors, personal tutors and provision for remediation and curricular choice.

H.6 Students are prepared for the next stage of study or employment by appropriate contacts, information, advice and training.

H.7 Among individual staff there is a general attitude of concern for the well-being of students.

Part of the Quality Assessment Framework of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC, 1996)

Focussing Feedback Accurately

The focus of feedback can vary a great deal. Sometimes a wide-angle lens is needed to capture as many different features as possible of a course or programme as it stands. At other times – for instance when feedback in previous years has established a clear and reasonably stable overall view of the course or programme – all that may be needed is to zoom in on an issue that continues to cause concern, or to canvass possible changes.

Deciding what your focus will be is essential if feedback is not to be a wasted opportunity. And precise focussing will help to avoid the "feedback fatigue" which sets in when unnecessary demands are made of your students' time ... and of your own. So which of the following kinds of feedback on a course are you looking for?

THE COURSE AS IT STANDS

- feedback on student satisfaction (overall and specifically);
- feedback on how far course aims and objectives are achieved;
- feedback on how far the various parts of the course link together as an integrated whole;
- a periodic check on a well-established course, to ensure that it continues to proceed satisfactorily.

THE COURSE WITHIN A WIDER PROGRAMME

- finding out how well the course builds on what students know;
- finding out how well it blends with other parallel courses;
- finding out how good a foundation it provides for subsequent courses.

APPROPRIATENESS TO DIFFERENT STUDENTS

- exploring how far the course succeeds in meeting the needs of different groups of students (e.g. traditional vs non-traditional entrants, those taking the course as a main subject vs. those taking it as a subsidiary subject or optional outside course).

A SINGLE ISSUE OR ASPECT

- a diagnostic exercise, homing in on a particular issue or aspect (e.g. workload) which has been identified as problematic.

RECENT CHANGES TO THE COURSE

- targetted feedback which monitors the impact of changes to the course which have recently been introduced.

FUTURE CHANGES TO THE COURSE

- inviting suggestions on how the course might be improved;
- asking students to assess the desirability of specific changes under consideration by the course team.

THE COURSE IN RETROSPECT

- comment from students who completed the course in earlier years, in the light of their subsequent academic progression.

Similar questions arise when feedback is sought in relation to a programme of study rather than a course. However, there are further issues which could be fruitfully explored, e.g. :

- coherence across the various course units, modules or options which go to make up the programme;
- the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes over successive years of the programme;
- the views of past graduates, from the vantage-point of their subsequent vocational experience (as in the example opposite).

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY OF PAST GRADUATES

To what extent have you been required to use the following skills since graduating?
(Please put the appropriate number (1-4) in the first box opposite each skill)

Not at all 1	A little 2	To some extent 3	A great deal 4	
management of people				
management of projects				
handling money				
how to work with other professionals				
public speaking				
writing reports				
informal oral presentation				
leading groups				
working in groups				
self appraisal				
mastering a new subject				
organising own time				
typing, word processing				
computing				
running an office				
understanding the past as an aid to present wisdom				
understanding other cultures / religions				
ancient languages				
modern languages				
preaching / communication				
biblical exegesis				
theological reflection				
pastoral care and counselling				
leading / enabling worship				
devotional life / spirituality				
Christian education (church)				
religious education schools				

Any other skills we have not listed?.....

(b) Please put an asterisk (*) in the second box against the three skills which you consider to be the most important ones.

(Extract from a questionnaire designed by the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh)

What Topics Need To Be Addressed?

INTRODUCTION

Although feedback on teaching is often confused with feedback on courses, these two concerns, though interrelated, need to be clearly distinguished from one another.

FEEDBACK ON TEACHING

As individuals, university teachers look for feedback on their teaching expertise, whether globally or in relation to specific activities such as lecturing, small-group teaching or assessment. Feedback of this kind plays an essential role in identifying strengths and weaknesses and thus providing a foundation for developing and enhancing teaching skills.

FEEDBACK ON COURSES

Feedback on courses, by contrast, is designed to inform course teams, and is concerned with the effectiveness of a course 'in the round'. This means looking at the various elements that together make up a course (the subject-matter, the teaching methods used, and so on) while perhaps also weighing the respective contributions of the teaching staff concerned.

WHY THE CONFUSION?

How then does confusion arise? First, copies of 'good' questionnaires are often passed from one colleague to another as useful models, without an awareness that many of these questionnaires were developed in the USA with the specific goal of appraising teaching expertise for tenure and promotion purposes. Second, all university teachers have an understandable interest in getting answers to the question 'How am I doing?' And seeking feedback on each individual's input into a course may override consideration of a course as a rounded teaching-learning experience.

AVOIDING CONFUSION

You can avoid this confusion by careful groundwork, establishing at the outset what aspects or topics call for feedback given the nature of a particular course. Over the next few pages, we outline a wide range of possibilities in relation to:

a. course aims, content and structure;
b. teaching;
c. learning and studying;
d. assessment;
e. course organisation and management;
f. student background variables;
g. students' overall response to a course or programme of study.

Note that the possibilities suggested do not necessarily represent a precise match with the quality assessment framework used at the time of writing by the Higher Education Funding Councils (see for example SHEFC, 1996). In some respects, the possibilities outlined here are rather more fine-grained, but the listing also omits some aspects of the SHEFC and other frameworks which are primarily concerned with departmental teaching practices overall rather than with particular courses or programmes of study.

a. Course Aims, Content and Structure

Within contemporary notions of 'good practice', scrutinising the aims and objectives of a course or programme (or the learning outcomes to which it aspires) is seen as indispensable. Since these are viewed as the heart and soul of a curriculum, they are of central concern in any feedback initiative not only in their own right, but also in terms of how they shape and influence curriculum content and structure. And as will be evident in the pages which follow, they also need to be looked at in relation to learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to what extent the aims and objectives or learning outcomes of the course or programme of study have been made explicit;
- to what extent they have been clearly communicated to the students concerned;
- to what extent they have been achieved in practice;
- whether these aims, objectives and outcomes collectively represent an appropriate balance of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes, in terms of addressing:
  - the needs and circumstances of the students taking the course or programme, e.g. with respect to their age, gender and ethnic origins, their aspirations and motivations, their prior educational experience, and any special needs they may have arising from disabilities of any kind;
  - the relevant discipline(s) or subject area(s);
  - the distinctive 'mission' both of the department(s) concerned and of the wider university or college;
  - the needs of the economy and of society at large.

SUBJECT-MATTER

- whether the subject-matter is pitched at an appropriate level, given students' backgrounds and the admission requirements set;
- whether the course content is up-to-date;
- its relevance to subsequent employment opportunities, whether in broad terms or in relation to a specific profession or vocation to which it is linked;
- how far the presentation of course content succeeds in building upon what has been presented in related courses taken by the students in earlier years;
- how well important and relevant links are made with other courses currently being studied by the students concerned;
- whether students are offered sufficient (or even excessive) choice, e.g. between course sections, units or options.

COHERENCE AND SEQUENCING

- how well the various parts, sections or components of the course or programme of study hang together as a coherent and integrated whole;
- to what extent the course content follows an identifiable and valid sequence or structure which facilitates students' understanding;
- how far the structure of the course or programme succeeds in promoting the progressive development of students' knowledge, skills, values or attitudes.

b. Teaching

As far as teaching is concerned, feedback usually needs to focus both on the overall range and blend of teaching methods adopted and on the more specific experiences arising in relation to each method. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the number of questions which *might* potentially be asked is in many cases so large as to be unmanageable, and some prioritising of issues is therefore usually unavoidable.

MIX OF TEACHING

- to what extent the combination of teaching methods followed represents an effective blend in relation to curriculum aims and objectives or learning outcomes;
- whether there is sufficient variety in the methods used to stimulate and challenge students;
- how well the various methods used are interlinked and coordinated.

SPECIFIC METHODS

- how far any specific teaching method adopted (e.g. lectures, tutorials, practicals) has been well-executed, with respect to e.g. :
  - the organisation of material;
  - the level at which it is pitched (including how well account has been taken of diverse student needs);
  - the pace of delivery;
  - clarity of presentation (including whether clear explanations are normally given);
  - the enthusiasm conveyed by lecturers, tutors or demonstrators;
  - stimulation of student interest;
  - lecturers' / tutors' command of their subject-matter;
  - opportunities for interaction and dialogue (e.g. via student questions and comments);
  - the use made of audio-visual aids (overhead projector, slides, video, white or blackboards, etc.);
  - the use of handouts / other course materials;
  - the use of particular facilities, equipment, or resources.
- its overall contribution to students' learning.

N.B. also that particular teaching methods will call for specific questions: e.g. in lab. practicals, ensuring that set tasks were completed in the time allocated, and in tutorials, handling students' questions and comments. Opposite are examples of self-evaluation checklists devised specifically for these teaching methods. They are intended for use by all the tutors (or demonstrators) involved in a particular course, to encourage reflection and self-generated feedback, and as a basis for sharing experiences across the group in, say, a course team discussion.

TWO EXAMPLES OF SELF-EVALUATION CHECKLISTS

TUTORING: A CHECKLIST

Record by means of a tick in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
get the tutorial underway (establish links, aims, etc.)			
sequence and progress the tutorial task(s)			
ask questions and prompt students			
involve all members of the tutorial group			
handle students' questions and comments			
respond to students as individuals			
keep the focus on the main topic(s)			
help sustain students' interest			
ensure that key points were drawn out			
bring things to a close and indicate preparation task(s)			

Additional Comments

DEMONSTRATING: A CHECKLIST

Record by means of a tick in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
make sure that students had the necessary materials, instructions, equipment, etc.			
get the practical underway promptly			
try to ensure that all the set tasks or experiments were completed in the time available			
keep track of progress across the whole class			
handle students' questions and queries			
provide help when students encountered difficulties			
respond to students as individuals			
help sustain students' interest			
bring things to a close and indicate preparation task(s)			

Additional Comments

These checklists were devised by the TLA Centre, University of Edinburgh

c. Learning and Studying

Given that a significant proportion of the learning which takes place in higher education occurs outwith formal timetabled classes, during students' 'private study' time, it is important that your feedback strategy doesn't neglect this crucial dimension of the overall teaching-learning process.

EXPECTATIONS

- whether what is expected from students by way of learning and studying is made sufficiently clear to them.
- how far these expectations are realistic and manageable in terms of:
  - the demands made upon students' knowledge and understanding;
  - the demands made upon students' skills and competencies;
  - the implications of these expectations for students' workloads (whether in terms of overall volume or of the extent to which there are manageable peaks and troughs);
  - the amount of discretion students retain over what and how they learn and study at any given point in time.
- the likely consequences of the overall balance between formal teaching input and independent study for the quality of learning outcomes, in terms of e.g.:
  - levels of understanding attained;
  - standards of work produced;
  - the degree to which students are encouraged to become accomplished, self-reliant and resourceful in taking responsibility for their own learning.

GUIDANCE AND HELP

- how well-informed students are about the kinds and nature of guidance and help available to them, and how and when they can draw upon these
- what help students are actually given with difficulties they encounter, including:
  - how available lecturers/tutors are for consultation;
  - the adequacy of the help given.

USE OF STUDY FACILITIES

- students' experiences in the use of the library/resource centre, with respect to:
  - access (opening and closing hours);
  - accessibility (location);
  - the adequacy of the stock;
  - its availability (e.g. borrowing procedures satisfactory);
  - whether up-to-date/sufficient guidance given (e.g. in the use of the library, or via lists provided by lecturers and tutors of essential or recommended reading).
- students' experiences of using computer laboratories and similar facilities and resources, in terms of e.g.:
  - accessibility;
  - adequacy of the facilities for the purposes intended;
  - adequacy of initial training and/or guidance materials;
  - availability of ongoing support.

27

QUESTIONNAIRE ON DOMESTIC ENGINEERING 1

We are currently carrying out a review of the Domestic Engineering 1 course. We need to learn more about why students decide to study DE, what interests them, as well as about their study patterns and how they feel about the course.

1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about studying

	agree a lot	agree a little	don't agree at all
I find I have sufficient time (outwith timetabled classes) to do the amount of studying that I feel is necessary	☐	☐	☐
Social activities etc. leave me short of time for studying	☐	☐	☐
Studying privately doesn't seem to help me very much	☐	☐	☐
Distractions make it difficult for me to get down to studying	☐	☐	☐
I feel I need more help and guidance on how to study effectively	☐	☐	☐

	a lot	a little	not at all
2. How different is the style of teaching and learning at University from what you have experienced before?	☐	☐	☐
If different, have you had difficulty in adjusting? (Please outline any problems you have had)	☐	☐	☐

.....

.....

14. How much time, outwith timetabled classes, have you spent on each of the following activities in connection with Domestic Engineering 1?

	a lot	a little	none
Writing up practicals	☐	☐	☐
Rewriting/re-ordering lecture notes	☐	☐	☐
Understanding lecture notes/handouts	☐	☐	☐
Using textbooks, journals etc.	☐	☐	☐
Working on examples/problems	☐	☐	☐
Working on past exam questions	☐	☐	☐
Writing essays	☐	☐	☐
Preparing for tutorials	☐	☐	☐
Being stuck and so unable to get on	☐	☐	☐

Extract taken from a questionnaire devised by Dr RG Kelly, Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Edinburgh. For further details see Kelly, 1992.

d. Assessment

AIMS AND PURPOSES

- to what extent assessment aims and purposes are appropriate;
- to what extent these are clearly communicated to students;
- to what extent they are actually achieved.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND STANDARDS

- to what extent standards and criteria are made explicit;
- to what extent these are realistic and appropriate in scope;
- whether criteria have been fairly and validly weighted.

Examples of aspects of these two dimensions of assessment which might be explored with students appear as items 1, 8, 18, 24 and 35 in the information given on the facing page about the Course Experience Questionnaire. Together these items comprise a sub-scale on 'Clear goals and standards'. Other dimensions of assessment are captured in the sub-scales 'Appropriate workload' (items 5, 14, 19, 27 and 36) and 'Appropriate assessment' (items 7, 10, 17, 26, 29 and 32).

MIX OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

- how far the nature and range of assessment methods used are appropriate given curriculum aims, objectives, outcomes;
- whether these methods are appropriately linked or blended;
- whether the weightings allocated to each assignment, test or exam paper (as a percentage of the overall mark) reflect in a well-balanced way the demands made upon students and the nature and quality of the work produced;
- whether a judicious balance has been struck between coursework, in-course tests and final examinations.

SPECIFIC METHODS USED

- how far any specific assessment method used (e.g. essays, reports, class tests, unseen exams, poster presentations) is appropriate, given course aims, content and structure;
- how far the method concerned is intellectually challenging;
- whether requirements, questions and instructions are clear and unambiguous;
- how realistic are the deadlines set and their timetabling and workload implications (whether for students or staff);
- whether the resources students need to undertake assignments successfully (e.g. library stocks / computer lab provision / slide collections) are in sufficient supply and readily accessible;
- how far any given method facilitates learning, e.g. by helping students to consolidate, enlarge and deepen their understanding, reflect critically on and apply what they know, relate theory to practice, develop or refine skills.

N.B. that as with teaching methods, any given assessment method (e.g. project reports, oral exams, poster presentations) may call for specially tailored feedback questions if its distinctive features are to captured.

MARKING PRACTICES

- whether assessed work is marked fairly and consistently;
- whether work is returned promptly / by an agreed date;
- what opportunities there are for students to seek clarification of the marks awarded and comments made;
- whether feedback is adequate and helpful;
- whether the procedures for granting extensions or exemptions and for considering appeals are satisfactory.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE COURSE EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTIONS Please think about the course as a whole rather than identifying individual subjects, topics or lecturers. The questions relate to general issues about your course, based on comments that students have often made about their experiences of university teaching and studying.

SCORING Items are scored on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means 'definitely disagree' and 5 means 'definitely agree', save for those printed in italics, which are scored in the opposite direction.

ITEMS

#	*	1	It's always easy here to know the standard of work expected	CG
	*	2	This course has helped me to develop my problem-solving skills	GS
#		3	There are few opportunities to choose the particular areas you want to study	IN
#	*	4	The teaching staff of this course motivate students to do their best work	GT
#	*	5	*The workload is too heavy*	AW
	*	6	The course has sharpened my analytic skills	GS
#		7	*Lecturers here frequently give the impression they have nothing to learn from students*	AA
#	*	8	You usually have a clear idea of where you're going and what's expected of you	CG
#	*	9	Staff here put a lot of time into commenting on students' work	GT
#	*	10	*To do well on this course all you really need is a good memory*	AA
	*	11	This course has helped develop my ability to work as a team member	GS
	*	12	As a result of doing this course, I feel more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	GS
	*	13	This course has improved my written communication skills	GS
#		14	*It seems to me that the syllabus tries to cover too many topics*	AW
#		15	The course has encouraged me to develop my own academic interests as far as possible	IN
#		16	Students have a great deal of choice over how they are going to learn in this course	IN
#	*	17	*Staff seem more interested in testing what you've memorised than what you've understood*	AA
#	*	18	*It's often hard to discover what's expected of you in this course*	CG
#	*	19	We are generally given enough time to understand the things we have to learn	AW
#	*	20	The staff make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work	GT
#		21	Students here are given a lot of choice in the work they have to do	IN
#	*	22	Teaching staff here normally give helpful feedback on how you are going	GT
#	*	23	Our lecturers are extremely good at explaining things to us	GT
#		24	*The aims and objectives of this course are NOT made very clear*	CG
#	*	25	Teaching staff here work hard to make subjects interesting	GT
#	*	26	*Too many staff ask us questions just about facts*	AA
#	*	27	*There's a lot of pressure on you as a student here*	AW
	*	28	This course has helped me develop the ability to plan my own work	GS
#		29	*Feedback on student work is usually provided ONLY in the form of marks and grades*	AA
#		30	We often discuss with our lecturers or tutors how we are going to learn in this course	IN
#		31	*Staff here show no real interest in what students have to say*	GT
#		32	*It would be possible to get through this course just by working hard around exam times*	AA
#		33	This course really tries to get the best out of all its students	GT
#		34	*There's very little choice in this course in the ways you are assessed*	IN
#	*	35	The staff here make it clear right from the start what they expect from students	CG
#	*	36	*The sheer volume of work to be got through in this course means you can't comprehend it all thoroughly*	AW
		37	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this course	

Note:

GT = Good Teaching scale
CG = Clear Goals and Standards scale
GS = Generic Skills scale
AA = Appropriate Assessment scale
AW = Appropriate Workload scale
IN = Emphasis on Independence scale

Items 1-36 = CEQ36; # items=CEQ30 (used in Ramsden, 1991; Richardson, 1994); * items=CEQ23

The CEQ is reproduced with the permission of Paul Ramsden. Further details can be found in Wilson, Lizzio and Ramsden(in press). Professor Ramsden regrets that he is not able to offer one-to-one support to users of the CEQ.

e. Course Organisation and Management

The effectiveness with which a course is organised and managed may have a telling impact on the quality of students' learning, yet this dimension is often overlooked when feedback is sought. Organisational topics you might need to address are as follows.

COURSE MANAGEMENT

- whether, overall, the course or programme seems to be well-managed;
- to what extent the various staff involved (e.g. lecturers, tutors, demonstrators, technicians, secretaries, computing officers, librarians) work together as an effective team, including:
  - how well-informed the various members of staff are about their particular roles and responsibilities in relation to the course/programme as a whole;
  - whether lines of communication and decision-making are clear to all concerned and operate well;
  - whether there are sufficient opportunities for the team to meet to share common concerns and issues, review practices and discuss possible developments.
- whether students are given adequate opportunities (e.g. via student representatives/staff-student consultative committees) to convey their views of the course or programme and raise pressing issues.

STAFF COMMITMENT

- how far staff are viewed as committed to good teaching;
- to what extent staff are approachable;
- to what extent staff are helpful;
- to what extent staff show concern for the welfare of students.

COURSE DOCUMENTATION

- to what extent course documentation (e.g. course handouts, syllabus outlines, course regulations and procedures, timetables) is adequate to students' needs;
- to what extent course documentation is clear and understandable.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

- whether timetabling is as satisfactory as it can be, given competing calls on staff time, accommodation and resources;
- whether teaching venues are adequate;
- whether physical resources (e.g. equipment, facilities):
  - are adequate to the needs of the course or programme;
  - are in good working order;
  - are readily accessible when required;
- whether safety procedures are followed at all times.

One way of seeking feedback on course organisation and management is to use a checklist of the kind illustrated on the page opposite. This might be completed by all members of the course team as a preliminary to group discussion, or it might be used by an external colleague or professional peer who has been invited to comment as an outside observer.

COURSE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Preparation and planning

Comment here on the objectives, selection of content and choice of learning activities in relation to: the nature of the subject matter; students' interests, abilities and stage of development; individual and group needs.

Class management

Comment here on teaching and communication techniques: ability to establish student / teacher relationships conducive to learning; organisation of large and small group techniques; use of voice and gesture.

Use of resources

Comment here on the knowledge, use and management of reference materials, handouts and resources outside class.

Monitoring effectiveness

Comment here on the way the effectiveness of teaching methods and students' progress and understanding was monitored during the session, and on the way responsive action was taken.

General Appraisal

Summarise overall strengths and weaknesses and the identification of areas and issues for further development.

This checklist is taken from Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) p.225.

cf. 32

f. Background Variables

The students taking a particular course may be drawn from varied backgrounds and approach the course with varying levels both of commitment and of familiarity with relevant subject-matter.

Since such differences may significantly influence how students respond to a course or programme, your feedback strategy may need to elicit information on an appropriate range of these background variables, perhaps including:

- students' entry qualifications / pre-course background;
- students' prior knowledge of the subject area to be covered;
- what skills or competences students possess, and at what levels;
- what relevant professional or industrial experience the students may already have (particularly where taught postgraduate courses are concerned);
- the students' familiarity (on the basis of their prior educational experiences) with relevant study strategies, including what will be expected of them:
  - in coursework, tests and examinations;
  - in how they prepare for and / or follow-up formal teaching situations such as lectures, tutorials and practicals, or make use of self-study or resource-based learning materials;
  - in other appropriate aspects of their private study and independent learning.
- the age-range of students;
- the gender mix;
- students' cultural or ethnic origins and (where a course or programme recruits significantly from overseas) their verbal and written fluency in English;
- students' patterns of subject choice (e.g. other subjects studied, or whether this course is optional / outside / compulsory);
- students' attendance patterns (where attendance is not compulsory);
- students' self-ratings:
  - of their own performance;
  - of their level of interest in the subject-matter;
  - of the level of effort they commit to the course.

Although the possible variables may seem rather large, the relevance of any particular variable is likely to vary a great deal from one course or programme to another. In devising your feedback strategy, therefore, you need to identify those which are clear priorities, and to determine those aspects of the course or programme (e.g. course content, teaching methods, assessment) where they are likely to have most influence on students' perceptions and experiences.

On the facing page is an illustration of how background information might be sought from students as part of a questionnaire or pro forma.

BACKGROUND DETAILS

All sorts of students may attend the same course, and they may react differently to it. Students may be in different years of their degree, from different faculties, on various degrees; from Scottish schools, or from outwith Scotland. For this reason only, please tell us a little about yourself.

Age:	16 or 17 [ ]	18 [ ]	19 [ ]	20 [ ]	21 [ ]	22-30 [ ]	over 30 [ ]
Gender:		male [ ]	female [ ]				
Year in university:		1st [ ]	2nd [ ]	3rd [ ]	4th [ ]	5th [ ]	Postgraduate [ ]
Main entrance qualifications:		Highers [ ]	Highers and CSYS [ ]	A levels [ ]	Mix of Highers and A levels [ ]	Access course [ ]	Other [ ]
This course is			a main subject for your degree (incl. joint hons) [ ]	a subsidiary subject [ ]	an 'outside' subject [ ]		
This course is		compulsory [ ]	optional [ ]				
Do you feel that on this course you have been...?			doing well [ ]	doing OK [ ]	just about coping [ ]	struggling [ ]	

Extract from a Course Feedback Questionnaire devised by
Dr. Kate Day, TLA Centre, University of Edinburgh

g. Students' Overall Response

Finally, you may consider it worthwhile to find out about the overall response to a course or programme of study. This is generally speaking an issue on which feedback is only sought from students, though there may sometimes be occasions when similar questions might be put to internal or external colleagues and peers.

One approach is simply to invite the students to respond in relation to the course or programme concerned. Another is to ask them to compare it with other courses or programmes they are studying. The Course Feedback Pro Forma on the facing page is an example of the first approach, as is the Course Experience Questionnaire which was introduced earlier in this chapter to illustrate the kinds of questions students might be asked about assessment.

The topics addressed in surveying students' overall response to a course or programme can include:

- students' overall satisfaction with the course or programme;
- students' satisfaction with specific parts or sections of the course or programme (as compared to other parts or sections studied);
- overall, how interesting students find the course or programme;
- overall, how intellectually challenging students find it;
- how manageable they find the overall workload (and perhaps how it compares with other courses or programmes of which they have experience);
- whether students feel they are learning a little / a lot;
- whether what is learnt is of value, as students perceive it, e.g. in relation to their likely subsequent careers;
- the extent to which students would confidently recommend the course / programme to others.

It hardly needs adding that since responses to questions such as these may well diverge widely across any given cohort of students, collecting information at the same time on potential background variables is especially worthwhile.

A COURSE FEEDBACK PRO FORMA

We would like to know more about your views on how the course has gone. Please jot down your reactions in the matrix below, then complete the background details requested.
There is no need to add your name or sign the form: all responses will be confidential.

TOPIC	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
The Course e.g. clarity of aims, workload, content, interest, intellectual demand, coherence, assessment		
Teaching e.g. structure, clarity, pace, enthusiasm, visual aids, handouts, feedback		
Learning e.g. background knowledge, notetaking, time spent, enthusiasm, attendance		

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT YOU		under 21	over 21		male	female
	age	☐	☐	gender	☐	☐

Part 3: Sources and Methods

Introduction 34

Feedback from Within the Course Team:

- Overview 35
- Course Team Interaction 36
- Previewing 38

Feedback from Students:

- Overview 39
- Timing and Response Rate 40
- Structured Discussion
  - Overview 42
  - The Pyramid Approach 44
  - Nominal Group Technique (NGT) 45
- Student Panels 46
- Post-It Displays 48
- Email Comments and Variants 50
- Staff-Student Consultative Committees 52
- Assignment, Placement and Project Logs 54
- Questionnaires and Pro Formas
  - Overview 55
  - Conventional Questionnaires 56
  - Pro Formas 58
  - Machine Readable Questionnaires 60
  - On-Line Questionnaires 62
  - One-Minute Questionnaires 64

Feedback from External Colleagues and Peers:

- Overview 65
- Comment on Course Material 66
- External Examiners and Assessors 68
- Quality Assessment and Accreditation 70

Incidental Feedback 72

Introduction

As we suggested in the opening part of this guide, good feedback practice calls for the use of a variety of sources. There are in fact three main sources of feedback on courses and programmes of study:

- course team colleagues;
- students;
- external academic colleagues and professional or industrial peers.

In a thoroughgoing evaluation, feedback from each of these sources needs to be weighed and interpreted alongside other relevant information (the 'incidental feedback' which is discussed in the closing page of this section) relating to the course or programme concerned.

The principal reason for drawing on multiple sources of feedback is that any given source has particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, students can legitimately be asked to what extent the quality of the teaching they received met their learning needs, or whether theory was helpfully linked to practice in ways that enhanced their understanding or sharpened their powers of observation and insight. But students are not well-qualified to judge whether the subject-matter was up-to-date or whether a programme of study would be likely to provide a secure foundation for later professional practice — such questions must be asked of academic colleagues and peers.

The same argument applies to the use of a variety of *methods* of obtaining feedback, but there are also practical advantages in being able to choose from amongst a range of options:

- particular methods may demand specific expertise (e.g. in designing a questionnaire or convening a structured discussion) or call for facilities (e.g. for computerised processing of data from a large group of students) which may not be readily available to a course organiser;
- constraints of time and effort will influence what methods can realistically be contemplated;
- there are diminishing returns when the same approach to getting feedback is repeatedly followed, and both students and staff can fall victim, for example, to 'questionnaire fatigue'.

In what follows, each source is introduced in turn and the methods appropriate to it are outlined.

Feedback from Within the Course Team: Overview

University teaching is no longer a private and solitary activity conducted 'behind closed doors', as David Layton was able to describe it in 1968*. Degree courses and programmes are nowadays more systematically documented and monitored, while course colleagues are more accustomed to teaching collaboratively and sitting in on one another's classes.

From the standpoint of feedback, this shift towards greater openness and collaboration is a significant step forward, since teaching colleagues have a major and distinctive contribution to make in helping to improve the quality of course provision. They possess relevant subject and teaching expertise, they are acquainted with the students concerned and - unlike external colleagues and peers - they have the insider's understanding of the workings of a course, the programme(s) of study of which it forms a part, and departmental and institutional practices. They are therefore particularly well-placed to give a considered view on questions such as:

- the extent to which course aims and expectations are appropriately challenging yet realistically within students' capabilities;
- goodness-of-fit between curriculum content, teaching methods, independent study assignments and assessment practices;
- the adequacy of resources and facilities (at least by comparison to similar courses and programmes in the same institution);
- course organisation and management, particularly in so far as this affects the role of the course team in teaching and assessment.

In the pages which follow, we outline two methods of eliciting feedback from course team colleagues: interaction and course team previewing. A third possibility - comment on course materials - appears in a later section as a method of gaining feedback from external colleagues and peers, but can be used equally appropriately within a course team.

* Layton, D. (ed.) *University Teaching in Transition*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd. (1968)

Course Team Interaction

SUMMARY Interaction of various kinds is essential to ensure that all those involved in teaching a course communicate effectively with one another and have opportunities to review their experiences of how well the course has gone.

APPLICATIONS Course team interaction is especially important:

- whenever a large course is taught by several teaching staff in a variety of roles (e.g. lecturers, tutors, demonstrators);
- when a new course has been launched, and it is important to take regular soundings on how it is progressing.

APPROACHES A key question to resolve, particularly if the course team is large, is how often it should meet as an entire team. For an established course, once a term/semester may be adequate, but a newly launched course may call for more frequent meetings so that emerging difficulties can be promptly tackled.

But just as important as meetings of the full course team is the question of what other forms of interaction within and between particular groups of teaching staff are actively encouraged and pursued. This might include regular informal meetings of:

- those lecturing on a part of the course where close links between successive lectures are crucial;
- those leading tutorial groups or demonstrating at practicals – whether reviewing their experiences with one another or discussing with the lecturers concerned the match between lectures, tutorials and practicals.

ADVANTAGES Interaction of this kind might also be achieved simply by channelling feedback through the course organiser or course team leader. This too could be informal (by phone, electronic mail or via pigeon holes) or make use of a pro forma like *Next Time I Do This ...* as in the example opposite. Interaction between course team members can also be used not only to monitor the effectiveness of the course but also to collate information on any problems and difficulties students are experiencing.

- interaction of various kinds helps to capture the diversity of teaching-learning experiences and promote discussion and reflection;
- it can play a crucial role in establishing how well the various parts of a course interrelate (e.g. links between lectures, tutorials and practicals, or between different sections or units of the course).

LIMITATIONS

- there may be timetabling difficulties and concerns about the calls on everyone's time if a large course team meets frequently or if interaction is over-formalised or unrealistically demanding;
- by staying in close touch with lecturers and tutors on an informal basis, however, a course organiser can keep to the minimum the need for large formal meetings.

NEXT TIME I DO THIS

Course: **Activity:** ☐ **Lecture** ☐ **Tutorial** ☐ **Practical** ☐ ..... **(other)**

When I gave this class what seemed to go well was....

And what didn't seem to go as well as I'd wish was....

The next time I do this:

I should omit....	I should change	I should add....

AN EXAMPLE OF INTERACTION BY EMAIL

Date: Mon, 15 May 1996 0859:37:44 GMT
From: Stevie.Staunton <sstaunton@topog.GPC.ac.uk>
Subject: My tutorial group's feedback
To: D_ Bennetto@GPC.ac.uk

Here's some feedback that I got from my bunch this morning.

General: Well organised, interesting; workload about right; would have preferred to have had the notes earlier (ideally at the start of the module; microphones thought to be a good idea; annoyed by behaviour of some members of class during lectures.

Practicals: Enjoyed; not enough time to do the WWW stuff.

Unit D.1: Felt that the examples done in the lectures were too easy (compared to what turned up in the exam); otherwise good module.

Units D.6-7: Not a favourite. Felt to be uninspiring; some felt that the lecturer lacked conviction, and was unbalanced in delivering the materials (some too detailed, some too vague); Grampian and Lowlands stuff interesting, though.

Units E.1-4: Really liked this one; lecturer's style popular (lots of audience participation, apparently); good use of A/V; more detail preferred on the OHP slides.

Previewing

SUMMARY A method of feedback which draws on the knowledge and experience of course colleagues to 'preview' or give advance consideration to potentially problematic course material.

APPLICATIONS Previewing can be especially worthwhile:

- when new material is being introduced which may be particularly difficult to present clearly or concisely, or which students may not easily grasp;
- when 'getting it right first time' is crucial, e.g. when a lecture or series of lectures by one course member provides the cornerstone for tutorials, practicals or coursework assignments in which other teaching colleagues are involved;
- when past students have found the material difficult and a new approach is being sought.

APPROACHES Previewing involves dialogue with one or perhaps two course colleagues who share with you an informed understanding of the course and its students. (There is no particular reason why colleagues from outwith the course team should not take part in previewing, aside from the practical objection that more time will be needed to brief them on the course background.)

The role of your colleague(s) in previewing is a specific and exacting one. It is to listen attentively as you outline the plans and ideas you have in mind; to assist you in anticipating problem areas and courses of difficulty; and where appropriate, to encourage you in weighing what options would be open to you in addressing these. This calls for skill and sensitivity: the aim is to prompt reflection and reappraisal rather than to make sweeping judgements which might stifle constructive dialogue. Previewers should therefore be chosen with care - perhaps through a reciprocal arrangement where all concerned will at some point in the course assume the roles of previewer and previewee.

ADVANTAGES

- sources of potential difficulty can be anticipated and, hopefully, forestalled;
- relatively straightforward to organise;
- can complement and be combined with comment on course materials ;
- when used widely can help forge a common understanding of course aims and teaching-learning strategies.

LIMITATIONS

- calls for skills and sensitivity on the part of previewers;
- needs to be carefully allied to feedback from the students taking the course.

Feedback from Students: Overview

Feedback from students has a legitimate and indeed indispensable contribution to make to course monitoring and evaluation. The purpose of teaching is to promote and enhance learning, and as recipients or 'consumers' of teaching, students are in a unique position to offer feedback on a course from the learners' eye-view. This does not mean that in itself student feedback amounts to an objective picture of the workings of a course: it represents one perspective — albeit a crucial one — and so needs to be complemented by feedback from other sources in arriving at a considered view.

Although current students remain the obvious choice for providing student feedback, graduates, or those who have dropped out or failed the course could also make a useful contribution. Where current students are used, it might be that a particular subgroup could be selected (for example, mature or overseas students), to provide specific information.

There are two reasons why student reactions cannot be the sole criterion for judging the success of a course. First, most programmes of study contain some subject-matter which, though essential to an understanding of the discipline, many students find especially difficult or uncongenial. Relatively lower satisfaction levels may sometimes be inevitable, however gifted the teaching. Second, it is misleading simply to equate students with 'customers' or 'clients', who need only pay for what they require. Learning is more than simply the product of teaching, for it is contingent upon the commitment and capabilities of the learner.

The range of topics on which students can be asked to provide feedback is nonetheless potentially very large, and almost any manageable feedback strategy will involve some selection from an array of possibilities. Students are particularly well-placed to comment on:

- the extent to which course expectations and requirements have been clearly communicated to them;
- their perceptions of the quality of the teaching they have received, in terms of clarity, level, pace, stimulation of interest, and so on;
- the adequacy of the feedback, guidance and support provided in meeting their learning needs;
- the accessibility of facilities, equipment and other resources;
- the effectiveness of links made within and across courses and programmes of study.

Overleaf, we consider the crucial issues of timing and response rate, before moving on to look at several methods of obtaining feedback from students: structured discussion, staff-student consultative committees, student panels, posters and post-its, logs and, of course, questionnaires of various kinds. On practical grounds, methods which are exceptionally demanding of time and expertise (interviewing is an obvious example) have not been included, but these can be followed up in the *Further Reading* list at the end of this guide (see for example Roe and McDonald, 1984, pp. 38-39, 138, 140-141, and Ramsden and Dodds, 1989, pp. 20-22).

Timing and Response Rate

TIMING

Broadly speaking, feedback on courses can be gathered from students at four different stages of the course - before it gets underway, mid-way through, as it is finishing, or at a much later date. The purposes that the feedback is intended to serve will, to some extent at least, dictate when it is gathered.

If an individual lecturer or course team is interested in assessing how closely the course meets students' expectations, as in the example opposite, then it may be appropriate to find out what these expectations are before the students become influenced by the actual course content. But where a course team wants to get feedback so that it has the opportunity to implement changes as the course progresses, gathering feedback midway through the course becomes essential. On the other hand, summative evaluation gathered at the end of the course provides a good overview of the course as a whole and the ways in which its various elements are perceived to have fitted together. Sometimes though a wider picture is required – perhaps to assess how well the course content has articulated with employers' needs, or has prepared graduates for the world of work generally. Where this is the case, feedback data should be gathered quite some time after the course has ended.

These four possibilities need not be seen as mutually exclusive. It is perfectly feasible and desirable to schedule a number of smaller feedback sessions throughout the course, each with a different focus, rather than having a single large all-embracing one at the end. In order to avoid questionnaire fatigue, though, blending different methods of obtaining feedback is highly desirable.

RESPONSE RATE

If feedback is to reflect accurately the views of a class, then it is important to ensure a good response rate. Collecting feedback during a formal teaching period which is either compulsory or known to be well-attended (such as a tutorial or laboratory class) is one way of ensuring a good response, whereas scheduling an additional session or asking students to complete a questionnaire in their own time will have the reverse effect and will probably lead to bias in the sample. When using formal contact time though, it is of course vital to ensure that there is sufficient time available for students to complete the exercise without rushing. The quality of participation in any feedback exercise can be enhanced by explaining to students the mutual benefits that the exercise should have to both students and staff, so that students can feel they are making a valuable contribution to teaching and learning within the department.

DEPARTMENT OF AQUARIOLOGY
SURVEY OF STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

This questionnaire seeks to understand better why students want to study aquariology and what they hope to get out of it. The ultimate aim is to try to make courses match up better to the range of needs and demands.

Please answer the questions about your course of study AS YOU WOULD WISH IT TO BE.

1. Knowledge How important is it to you to learn about the following?

	Very important	Moderately important	Not very important
The physiological basis of fish behaviour	☐	☐	☐
Development through the life cycle	☐	☐	☐
Theoretical issues	☐	☐	☐
Shoaling	☐	☐	☐
Breeding programmes	☐	☐	☐
Marine ecology	☐	☐	☐

2. Skills How important is it to you to learn these skills?

	Very important	Moderately important	Not very important
Observational techniques	☐	☐	☐
Survey methods	☐	☐	☐
Experimental design and techniques	☐	☐	☐
Dissection	☐	☐	☐
Study skills	☐	☐	☐
Use of computers	☐	☐	☐
Clear, logical thinking	☐	☐	☐
Communication skills	☐	☐	☐

3. Experiences How important are the following to you as part of your life as a student?

	Very important	Moderately important	Not very important
Meeting professional aquariologists	☐	☐	☐
Talking with academic staff	☐	☐	☐
Hearing distinguished researchers	☐	☐	☐
Understanding basic issues in aquariology	☐	☐	☐
Discussing aquariology with other students	☐	☐	☐
Gaining wider perspectives	☐	☐	☐

4. Career plans Do you plan to be a professional aquariologist, if possible?

Definitely	Probably	Possibly	Probably not	Definitely not
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

45

Structured Discussion: Overview

SUMMARY

An approach which enables students to identify issues which concern them most. Unless the group is very small, the discussion is usually carefully focused and follows a specific structure. This helps to arrive at a clear collective view, while ensuring full and active participation by all the students concerned.

APPLICATIONS

It can be especially helpful:

- to avoid 'questionnaire fatigue';
- when feedback from elsewhere (e.g. a staff-student committee) pinpoints issues needing fuller exploration;
- when a new course has been launched, and you want to give students every opportunity to convey their impressions of its strengths and weaknesses.

APPROACHES

However open you would like the discussion agenda to be, providing students with at least some initial focus is essential. One option is to pose a small number of open-ended questions: for example, asking students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the course or to suggest what changes would be helpful. Another is to provide a checklist of themes as a trigger to discussion. This could be based on the material presented in the course or the various ways in which the course was presented - e.g. course aims, course structure, teaching methods used, and so on.

A feedback discussion also calls for special attention to structure, for two reasons. First, your aim is not just to generate a lively discussion, but one which deals systematically with the range of questions or themes posed and which enables all the members of the group to express their views. Second, some degree of anonymity is essential if students are not to be inhibited from expressing their views openly and honestly. A discussion framework in which views are shared through sub-groups (rather than expressed by individuals) can help to achieve this. Overleaf we describe two approaches to structuring, the pyramid discussion and NGT or nominal group technique.

ADVANTAGES

- students explore issues which matter most to them;
- there are opportunities to clarify points raised, to weigh their significance, and to discuss what action might be needed;
- feedback is simultaneously collected, summarised, and reviewed with students.

LIMITATIONS

- an hour of class time - perhaps more - needs to be set aside;
- can be difficult to use in very large classes, unless the discussion takes place in tutorial groups;
- handling a structured discussion well calls for skill and sensitivity. If you have little experience of this kind of discussion, you could consider:
  - inviting a colleague (as third party or honest broker) to convene the discussion on your behalf;
  - sitting-in and observing a structured discussion led by a colleague with experience of this approach.

STRUCTURED GROUP DISCUSSION
FACULTY OF MARINE TECHNOLOGY

24 October 1996 - c.50 students present

The following points, in order of priority, were elicited from the students.

Good features about the course:

1. Good balance between zoology and ecology - varied content.
2. Course interesting overall.
3. Crustacean lectures good, comprehensive and well backed up.
4. Liked informality, no parrot fashion rote learning.
5. Field trips good, very well-liked; most practicals good and relevant.
6. Liked short practical write-ups.
7. Exotic and Tropical Fish lectures enjoyable.
8. Liked giving presentations (minority view).

Bad features needing improvement:

1. Overall course aims poorly focussed; parts of course disjointed.
2. Computer practicals vague, needed more and better-prepared demonstrators, more focus and opportunity for feedback. Some were poorly thought out or the purpose was unclear.
3. Lack of a course text.
4. Plant life lectures seemed difficult; need to give more information - clearer illustrations would be helpful.
5. Practicals took up some lecture time, reducing opportunity for feedback and contact which might have kept things focused.
6. Essays and assignments take too long to be marked and returned.

I think the teaching team should meet soon to discuss the course while it is still fresh in our minds.

The Pyramid Approach

There are three steps to be worked through in a pyramid discussion, or 'snowballing' as it is sometimes called. These three steps are reflection, sharing in sub-groups, and plenary review.

REFLECTION

Pyramid discussion invariably begins with individual reflection (and a moratorium on conferring). This gives students time to collect their thoughts, and where appropriate to jot these down on a pro forma. If this stage is skimped, there is the danger that discussion will lack focus or fail to give some students' views a fair hearing. And jotting down thoughts can be especially helpful, since it not only assists reflection but also underscores the value placed on each student's contribution. You may have to reassure students, nonetheless, that what they jot down is for their own personal reference, and need not be handed in.

SUB-GROUPS

Reflection is followed by sharing in sub-groups. Students form small groups, which could be pairs, threes or fours. (A larger group may lessen the opportunity for every member's views to be systematically canvassed). First, each member of the sub-group gives his or her response to the questions of theme posed. Second, the sub-group as a whole is asked to come to a collective view, which will be conveyed to the larger group via a rapporteur or perhaps on flipcharts.

PLENARY

In the final step, the contributions of each of the sub-groups feed into a plenary review. One approach is for each sub-group to report in turn, whether via their rapporteur, a flipchart summary, or a combination of the two. If the discussion has ranged widely, however, or if the number of themes or questions to be addressed has been quite large, asking each sub-group to summarise its views in full may not be feasible. Instead, you could:

- try one or more 'rounds', inviting each sub-group to feed in one point or issue that has not been raised by any other group, until all the points raised in the sub-groups appear in the collective summary;
- ask each sub-group to select, from the issues it has discussed, the two or three most important ones - or those, say, on which there is a clear consensus;
- simply invite the sub-groups to display their flipcharts, to collate and record points raised. Everyone circulates and reads all the flipcharts. Verbal reports are not necessary.

Whichever approach you adopt, you must ensure that points raised are noted down and displayed for all to see. If flipcharts have not been used, you or one of the students should act as scribe, recording points on the board or on a transparency. This serves both as a check that each point raised has been clearly understood, and as a way of signalling that students' views will be taken seriously. If flipcharts have been used, collecting these up at the end provides you with a convenient record of the discussion.

FURTHER READING

For examples of the pyramid approach in action, see Gibbs (1981) and Hounsell (1981, 1983).

Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

In Nominal Group Technique or NGT, the accent is on pooling thoughts and reactions rather than debating them (which might risk individual views being prematurely 'talked out'). Though practice varies, NGT usually comprises six stages: question-setting, reflection, pooling, clarification, evaluation and review.

QUESTION-SETTING As with the pyramid approach, discussion is usually triggered with a broad but productive question, e.g. "What have you found most and least rewarding about this course?" or "How could this course be improved?"

REFLECTION Each member of the nominal group is asked to consider the question and to jot down his or her reactions, without conferring with any other member of the group. Up to ten minutes, perhaps more, is allocated for this essential stage in the approach.

POOLING The group leader – the tutor or perhaps a third party – then uses a board or flipchart to collate thoughts and reactions, ensuring that each member of the group has an opportunity to contribute. There is no commenting on or editing of items contributed, and the aim is to draw up as comprehensive a list as possible.

CLARIFICATION The group leader then goes back through the displayed list of items, to check that their meaning is clear to everyone. Once again, comment and debate are actively discouraged.

EVALUATION The items in the collated list are then ranked or rated. Each member of the group rates each item on, say, a five-point scale, or ranks the five most significant items in order of importance.

REVIEW Finally, an opportunity can be given for the group as a whole to review the findings and possible changes to the course.

Opinion varies on the optimal size for a nominal group: between 8 and 10 is a typical suggestion, though up to 15 may well be feasible. With a larger cohort of students, the most effective procedure would be to establish parallel nominal groups, each with its own leader. An additional stage is therefore needed to collate the findings of the various groups.

For a fuller discussion of the use of NGT in eliciting feedback from students, see O'Neil and Jackson (1983)

Student Panels

SUMMARY An effective way of promoting dialogue between staff and students about how a course could be improved. Two or three times during the course you arrange for a small group of randomly selected students to meet with a couple of course team members to discuss constructively their observations and suggestions about the course.

APPLICATIONS Student panels offer a useful supplement to questionnaire feedback by:

- probing more deeply the strengths and weaknesses of a course, as well as the reasons for judgements made;
- enabling students to contribute their ideas about what they would like to see happening.

APPROACHES How student panels are used will vary depending on departmental practice and the other kinds of feedback available. On one course where student panels have been operating for several years, two one-hour lunchtime meetings are arranged, with sandwiches provided. Three weeks before the first meeting (towards the end of the first term), invitations are sent to ten students randomly selected from the 200 people on the course. The turnout for this meeting is typically six to eight but has been lower on occasion.

For the second meeting , held at the end of the second or the beginning of the third term, the same students are invited back and supplemented by an additional random group of five so as to capitalise on both consistency and fresh thinking.

After the purpose of the meeting has been outlined, students are asked to comment on the course from their personal perspectives. The issues covered include whether the course objectives are being achieved, what parts of the course are going well, what can be done about any aspects causing difficulties, and the directions in which the course could develop. Students have shown themselves keen to contribute in this way and issues are logged for further consideration.

ADVANTAGES

- doesn't demand a great deal of time and effort;
- offers the opportunity for two-way feedback;
- provides additional information about problematic aspects;
- lets students (other than official reps) put forward ideas.

LIMITATIONS

- some scope for making changes promptly must actually exist;
- staff may find it hard not to take negative views personally and thus react too defensively;
- the students who attend are only a subset of the course members and, although randomly selected, are not necessarily representative.

STUDENT PANEL MEETING
DEPARTMENT OF AGROECONOMICS, MAY 96

Present: seven of the ten undergraduates invited at random and two members of staff (five females and two males; one older student; one overseas student)

The meeting opened with a brief resume of the recent questionnaire findings (which showed approximately a three-way split in students' overall assessment of the course). The intention was to encourage people to speak out, by confirming the value of student feedback and by providing a broader context. It worked in that there was relatively little 'holding back' - in the comments made and in willingness to contribute.

Issues raised/Queries re. possible action

- **Written resources for the course**

  - No textbook?

  Explained this is a response to previous year's dislike of single set text, and staff also in agreement. The only one available was not very lively or cost effective, because the level of detail was often inadequate and additional reading was needed.

  Suggested that next year we explain the policy at the outset.

  - Availability of books and articles?

  This year though, especially with more people in course, access to many essay reading refs. was v. difficult. Could get hold of something for most of main topics, but not enough for any particular one. Particularly true of offprints - uncatalogued and 'disappeared', because no proper 'sign-out' system.

  Agreed to see what can be done to improve holdings and regulate borrowing.

  - Handouts?

  Handouts tended to lag behind lectures. Students would like them either with the lecture or (preferably) in advance so that they would know what was coming.

  Depends on the function of a handout, but where appropriate worth doing?

- **The two-hour class periods**

  Generally confirmed (as per questionnaire) that too long if unbroken. Would like 10 min. break for all, not just some sessions. Also asked if scope for mixing in discussion/ other activity, as it was hard to maintain concentration or really take in if simply an extended lecture.

  Do we need a policy on breaks and what do you feel is an appropriate format?

- **Physical environment**

  Room v. stuffy and too cold / noisy if doors were left open. Poor lighting so that OHP's a problem.
  What we already know but can nothing be done to improve matters?

- **Tutorials**

  Thought most students were enthusiastic, but some problems e.g. not enough guidance re. what or how to prepare, series of topics a bit disjointed and not always connected up with rest of course. Negative reactions when we floated the idea of tutorless groups - v. sceptical and unenthusiastic.

  Maybe worth probing further about tutorials in next year's questionnaire - content and conduct?

- **Exams**

  Exams ok as regards reflecting the work covered and aspects emphasised. Wanted more individual feedback on the class exam to provide more pointers on how to improve performance. If not possible, suggested short general 'main problems and how to solve them session', with questions and answers.

  Also want to know, beforehand, what examiners are looking for e.g. what balance fact / argument.
  Could/should we think about providing better/further guidance before and/or afterwards?

- **First and second halves of the course**

  The second part seen as 'more relevant', at least by those wanting to specialise in Econometrics. But all recognised (albeit retrospectively?) the importance of having a sound theoretical framework.

  Looks like we've at last got the balance about right - three cheers!

A. Bond, Course Organiser *(I can, for the students at Panel Meeting.*

Post-it Displays

SUMMARY A simple but effective way of getting students to note down and display what they feel about how a course is going.

APPLICATIONS Post-it Displays can be especially helpful:

- as an informal and occasional method of taking stock of how students are reacting to a course in progress;
- as a straightforward way of getting students' immediate reactions to a specific part or aspect of a course (i.e. without waiting until the end of a course and the circulation, say, of an end-of-term questionnaire);
- as a means of generating student ideas about what changes they would like made to the course as it develops.

APPROACHES At an appropriate time during a sequence of teaching/learning activities, distribute to every student in the class three 'post-it' notes (from a pad containing small blank sheets with adhesive along the reverse top edge). Students label the 'post-it' notes 'stop', 'start', and 'continue'. Using these headings as prompts, they then reflect upon some particular aspect or even the course as a whole and note down what they would like to see stop, start and continue. 'Change' can be substituted for 'continue', and indeed a quite different set of prompts can easily be used.

Once individual reactions have been logged, which usually takes about five minutes, there are several possibilities. The most straightforward is to ask students to stick the 'post-its' onto three different parts of a wall, board, or door, so that everyone has an opportunity to see the full range of views. If the class is very large this may be rather impracticable, and running the post-it exercise in each tutorial or practical class would be more effective. In any event, the 'post-its' are readily collected together for the course tutor or the students to collate the observations and suggestions for further consideration. This kind of quick feedback can also feed into an agenda for a structured group discussion or raise issues for incorporation in a questionnaire.

ADVANTAGES

- provides feedback from all class members in a short space of time;
- focuses primarily on student experiences and concerns;
- scope for idiosyncratic comment as well as building up a broader picture.

LIMITATIONS

- no guarantee that specific items about which a course team would like feedback will actually be addressed;
- requires staff to be thick-skinned and receptive to whatever comments the students make, since these will be on open display and can sometimes be quite direct and personal;
- not possible to associate reactions with sub-groups within a class.

POST-IT FEEDBACK

Seminar on Research Methods

November 19, 1996

Post-It Feedback

STOP (n=12)

Structure

- Giving such a long introduction (x2)
- Truncating discussion (x4)

Content

- Too much on questionnaires - it was the alternatives that were new to me.
- Expecting instant feedback.

Style

- Reading out parts of the handout (x3)
- Leaving the OHP on with no transparencies on it.

START (n=12)

Structure

- Using examples earlier in the presentation (x3)
- Pre-circulating handouts. (x2)
- Using buzz groups to share reactions and experiences.

Content

- Providing more guidance on how to design questionnaires.
- Emphasising other approaches besides questionnaires.
- Talking more about ways of analysing data (x4)

CONTINUE (n=10)

Structure

- Conveying a broad range of issues so clearly (x2)
- The balance between input and discussion. (x2)

Content

- Including the information on action research.

Style

- Asking for input throughout the presentation (x4)
- The relaxed, flexible style (x2)
- Using flipcharts.
- Referring to page numbers in the handout.

E-mail Comments and Variants

SUMMARY *A simple approach which enables students to comment on course aspects as issues arise rather than wait until feedback opportunities are offered by the course organiser.*

APPLICATIONS Feedback via *e-mail (electronic mail)* may be useful:

- in identifying issues pertinent to students;
- as a method of feedback initiated by students as and when they consider it appropriate;
- in promoting dialogue among students and tutors.

APPROACHES In departments where coursework and practical classes involve students using networked computers on a regular basis, these facilities can also serve as a convenient mechanism for feedback. Students can be encouraged to use e-mail to send comments about the course to the course organiser, who in turn agrees to read them regularly and respond whenever appropriate and desirable. Although this approach lends itself to ongoing feedback as the course unfolds, it may be used equally validly for gathering feedback on specific issues or aspects of the course as they arise. For example, members of the course team may notice that deadlines are often being overrun, and would like to find out from students if there are any particular reasons for this. Providing a question or theme in a mail message to all students can therefore act as a valuable prompt.

Where the e-mail facility is not available, students could simply be invited to drop written comments into a publicly accessible suggestion box or to write them on a wallboard. The wallboard exposes individual comments to other members of the class which might be regarded as inhibiting, but also serves to generate discussion among students.

As with any other approach to feedback, some follow-up will be called for in response to the comments. Rigorous analysis is unlikely to be necessary, but the comments should nevertheless be collated and recorded more formally in a way that conveys to students that their views are taken seriously and outlines what action is being considered.

ADVANTAGES

- formal teaching time need not be specifically set aside;
- students can raise issues of importance to them;
- quick and easy for students to use, and staff to read.

LIMITATIONS

- little or no control over what students write - may become a graffiti board;
- only really useful as a supplement to other feedback;
- can be difficult to judge just how pressing is the need for action on some comments made.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FEEDBACK BY EMAIL

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1996 10:44:01
From: 038832@sociobiop.ULS.ac.uk
Subject: Lecture Notes
To: "Temporary List" @sociobiop.uls

Not that I want to start a barrage of notes on this subject, but I think it is a valid point. We have exams coming up, many essays to finish off for other subjects. The lecture notes should have been with us a lot sooner to give us time to revise properly. Unless I get them soon I do not think I will be able to get fair time to revise. Could our class rep raise this with the SSLC? Once again sorry for not writing straight to the class rep, but I don't have your address, and I thought there might be others in B4g with similar worries. So I'm emailing this to everyone in our year-group!!

R. Mabell

==========

Date: Thu, 10 Dec 1995 16:03:46
From: 001572@histol.ULS.ac.uk
Subject: Class rep. messages
To: Dan_Bennetto@uls.ac.uk

Hi Dan. Leah here. Thanks for the note about "being a class rep", I missed the rep talk so I was a bit lost, also I've been ill so I haven't had much contact with anyone. Anyway... I have several messages people have asked me to pass on..

1. A2h notes--- lack of them... I realise it takes time to create them and also time to make copies but people are really getting on my back about it....

2. The exam, when is it and is it going to be on the notes we haven't got?

3. The assignment... We were told the deadline might me moved back a bit, a week was mentioned? Is this true?

Well these are the messages I've been asked to pass on, thanks for your help

Leah Brodie

==========

Date: Mon, 3 Nov 1995 11:17:55
From: 093422@smithson-halls.ULS.ac.uk
Subject: Module rep.
To: Bobbie_Locke@uls.ac.uk

Thanks for the vote of confidence! Many of my fellow students are already taking advantage of their newly discover module representative.

The most common problem seems to be that people are being overwhelmed by the amount of information they are getting. For the non-native speakers this is a particular problem in the lectures as they have to spend a lot of time listening and reading rather than understanding.

One complaint is that the information doesn't appear to be structured and this hinders people from getting a coherent model of what the subject is all about . Perhaps you could spend a little time in the next lecture summarising where we've been and where we are going with the module?

Thanks . Staffan.

Staff-Student Consultative Committees

SUMMARY Staff–student consultative or liaison committees are usually departmental bodies which provide a formal mechanism for regular feedback and dialogue about courses and programmes of study.

APPLICATIONS Staff–student consultative committees can be especially helpful:

- as a means of taking regular soundings on how well courses or programmes of study are proceeding;
- as a complement to feedback obtained by questionnaires or other methods, with the possibility of exploring issues in greater depth.

APPROACHES If they are to work well, such committees must be valued by staff and students alike as an opportunity for frank and constructive dialogue. This is usually only achieved when:

- the frequency of meetings (at least once and possibly twice a term) has been formally established;
- a procedure has been established governing the number of student representatives and the method by which they are nominated;
- staff display a readiness to listen and to take students' views seriously
- meetings are minuted in a form which summarises points raised and notes what action is being taken and by whom;
- minutes are posted (e.g. on departmental notice-boards).

Staff also need to consider how best to brief student representatives on the role they are expected to play and how they might deal with the tricky question of representing their peers, particularly where a large course is involved.

A further consideration is staff representation: while students might be intimidated by the presence of large numbers of staff, it does seem essential that course organisers take part so that issues raised can be knowledgeably discussed and action considered by those with direct organisational responsibilities.

ADVANTAGES

- consultative committees can serve as a visible formal channel for communication between students and staff;
- points raised can be clarified and pursued through discussion;
- student concerns can be pinpointed and addressed more promptly than would be the case with end-of-term or end-of-year feedback.

LIMITATIONS

- it is difficult for student members of such committees to 'represent' their peers adequately; and on a large course, canvassing a wide range of others' views is seldom practicable;
- students may be reluctant to serve as representatives;
- students may be inhibited by the presence of staff, unless special efforts are made to encourage openness.

DEPARTMENT OF TIBETAN STUDIES
STAFF-STUDENT LIAISON COMMITTEE MEETING

Friday, 10th May, in the Seminar Room 1.00-2.00pm

AGENDA

YEARS I AND II	1.	Suggestion that students in practical tutorials should be streamed according to ability.
	2.	Practical tutorials are felt to be too "bitty"; there is need to combat apathy.
YEAR I	3.	Disparities in marking of language work.
	4.	Essay titles should be announced much earlier.
	5.	Literature/civilisation lectures too broad and are insufficiently focussed on the text?
	6.	Why buy the Rogers and North (expensive, little used?)
YEAR II	7.	Indigestibility of grammar component in Level II Language Studies.
YEAR IV	8.	Excessive load in Combined Studies degree (especially Language/Business Studies).

From: *A Jepson* (For Staff)
Y Piri (For Students)

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TIBETAN STUDIES STAFF-STUDENT LIAISON COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY, 10TH MAY AT 1.00PM

Years 1 and 2

1. **Streaming students in practical tutorials**. There are great technical problems in systematically streaming the 120 student in Tibetan Language 1; they would all need tests and there would be problems in finding tutorials times that did not clash. We do try to put near-bilingual students in the same groups if we know about these students at the start of the year and we will try to do this more effectively in the future. Early in Term 1, as an experiment, the language assistants will invite students to state whether they would like to change groups.

2. **Lack of structure in practical tutorials**. In earlier years, a precise content programme was used in tutorials but students asked us to change this. However, students will be invited to make suggestions to their tutors about topics to be discussed next term. The suggestion that tutorials should be of two hours duration, held fortnightly, is impractical for time-tabling reasons.

Year 1

3. **Disparities in marking of language work**. Tutors will continue to consult each other and to exchange samples of students' work, to try to achieve a greater uniformity. The marking scheme will be explained better and tutors will make clearer what is expected from a written exercise.

4. **Literature lectures are too broad and not sufficiently focussed on the text**. This is our deliberate policy! We will try to explain this policy more clearly. The lectures aim to provide a general background; tutorials and private study should focus on the text.

5. **Essay titles should be announced earlier.** Sorry! They will be henceforth.

6. **Rogers and North text too expensive**. The recent sharp price rise has been noted. Legal restrictions prevent us using substantial photocopied sections. The book may be replaced next (but not this) year.

Assignment, Placement and Project Logs

SUMMARY Although produced for other purposes, assignment, placement and project log books or diaries can yield useful insights on aspects of a course where staff have less contact with students than would normally be the case.

APPLICATIONS Where logs are already an established feature of a course, they can be especially helpful for feedback purposes:

- by focussing on a specific topic or section of the course;
- as a record made while an experience is fresh in a student's mind;
- as a distinctive source, illuminating ways in which various course aspects are consolidated from a student standpoint.

APPROACHES Logs lend themselves well to particular forms of course work or independent study including field trips, placements, clinical and ward-based experience, site visits, and community-based projects. Logs fulfil various functions: as a record of activity, for promoting reflection (particularly on links between theory and real-life applications), and as a means of assessing students' performance.

But such logs can often also be considered from the standpoint of feedback. They can help to establish the match (or mismatch) between actual student workloads and what the tutor had anticipated. They can point to difficulties students experienced in linking theory and practice, and they may indicate how productive a particular placement or assignment proved to be – e.g. in terms of availability of contacts, or interviewees, ease of access to data or other records, or on-site advice and help. These findings may in turn have implications for the tutor – for example, in reviewing earlier teaching inputs, pre-assignment briefing, and ongoing guidance and support.

When logs are read for assessment purposes, feedback pointers can be looked for explicitly at the same time, noting themes and the frequency with which they were cited. Where appropriate, these themes can be followed up through discussion with students.

ADVANTAGES

- logs can provide detailed qualitative data to complement feedback from other sources;
- using logs for feedback purposes requires little extra effort.

LIMITATIONS

- can be used for feedback purposes only where logging is already part of the course – it would be unrealistic to expect detailed logs to be kept solely for the purpose of feedback;
- if logs are assessed in a way which does not encourage students to reflect on problems and difficulties encountered, students may be reluctant to be open and frank in their accounts.

Questionnaires and Pro Formas: Overview

SUMMARY A well-established and widely used approach to obtaining systematic feedback from students that has many more possibilities than may be immediately obvious.

APPLICATIONS Questionnaires and pro formas can be especially helpful:

- in obtaining an overview of how a large number of students have reacted to various aspects of a course or programme of study;
- either for providing background information against which specific issues may be explored further, or for focussing intently on one particular aspect of the course;
- for building up a picture of how a course or programme of study has been received and has developed over time.

APPROACHES Questionnaires can vary a great deal across a large number of dimensions; for example, in their scope and focus, in the balance struck between teachers' and learners' concerns, and in the amount of time and effort required to obtain useful results.

The pages which follow describe both the conventional questionnaire and some of the many alternatives which are possible. These include: *one-minute questionnaires*, which are a simple and rapid way of getting fairly frequent feedback; *pro formas*, which are useful in putting structured but open-ended questions to students where classes are not large; and *on-line* and *machine-readable questionnaires*, which can help to minimise the effort involved in distributing and processing questionnaires.

ADVANTAGES

- an economical way of obtaining student responses to a common set of appropriately targeted questions;
- since there are many different types, they may be used in very different situations or for different purposes.

LIMITATIONS

- questionnaire construction and the interpretation of results require some craft knowledge and skills;
- students can suffer from questionnaire fatigue if asked the same questions repeatedly and if not able to see the contribution they have made to course developments;
- questionnaires alone rarely provide a fully rounded picture, and usually need to be supplemented by other forms of feedback.

Conventional Questionnaires

OVERVIEW There can be very few students and staff in contemporary higher education who have not come across the conventional course evaluation or student feedback questionnaire at some point or other, since its use has been so widespread. Yet its very familiarity often works against its effectiveness: though it looks straightforward, putting together a good questionnaire is quite a challenging undertaking.

DESIGN OR BORROW? In coming up with a questionnaire, there are on the face of it two broad choices: to use an existing one, or to devise one from scratch. Both approaches have their pros and cons. A ready-made questionnaire may seem attractive since the design has already been taken care of and there is some guarantee that it has been tried and tested. However, you may find that it doesn't fit your exact needs. Designing a questionnaire from scratch, on the other hand, ensures that it will contain only questions which seem appropriate to the particular circumstances; but it will be necessary to pilot the questionnaire and this can be time-consuming. For these reasons, probably the best option in most circumstances is to steer a middle course, by modifying an existing questionnaire or by 'cannibalising' worthwhile items from several questionnaires.

SIZE AND SCOPE Questionnaire size and scope will be determined by factors such as how much time students have to complete the questionnaire, and perhaps even how much time there will be for analysis. It is counter-productive developing a very long and detailed questionnaire – students may be reluctant to complete it or may show signs of questionnaire fatigue – ticking boxes or circling responses rather unthinkingly or carelessly. Instead, it may be better to limit the scope of the questionnaire by focussing on just a few issues, and to use an alternative method to examine other aspects of the course.

FOCUS Arriving at a clear view of what issues it will be important to cover provides an indispensable preliminary to choosing potential questions from existing questionnaires – skimp this preliminary step and you may well find yourself picking out far too many questions which 'look interesting' but aren't necessarily those which most need to be asked of the students.

FORMAT With word-processors now commonplace, there is tremendous scope for producing a questionnaire that is attractively designed and laid-out – which in turn is more likely to encourage students to take time and trouble in completing it conscientiously. Varying the form in which questions are asked and responses invited (as in the example opposite) also aids visual attractiveness and minimises the kind of repetitive box-ticking which dulls rather than sharpens students' mental alertness.

Remember also that most well-crafted course questionnaires combine fixed- or closed-response items with a number of open-ended questions, enabling students to express their views on aspects of the course or programme of study which have not already been raised elsewhere.

QUESTION FORMATS: SOME EXAMPLES

	Definitely agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Definitely disagree
7. Coursework was marked fairly.	5	4	3	2	1
8. The feedback given on assessed work was helpful.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Coursework was returned to students promptly.	5	4	3	2	1

Lecture block F was

Well organised	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Not well organised
Clearly presented	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Not clearly presented
Interesting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Dull
Good use of handouts	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Poor or no use of handouts
Helped my understanding	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Didn't help my understanding

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following comments on the course as regards

	what you expected			what you have found		
	a lot	a little	not at all	a lot	a little	not at all
Heavy workload	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ideas presented fast	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Difficult content	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A lot of lectures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Emphasis on theory	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Pro Formas

SUMMARY Pro formas are semi-structured questionnaires, sufficiently specific to encourage students to focus their thoughts, yet general enough to avoid making prior assumptions about which aspects of courses are important to students. Students can express what they feel openly, and generally welcome the opportunity to do so. With pro formas this can be done without necessarily having to write much. Pro formas tend to produce richer and fuller data than can be obtained from fixed-response questionnaires.

APPLICATIONS Pro formas are particularly suitable for smaller classes (up to about 30 students), where issues raised can be relatively easily sorted into themes, and the incidence of each theme tabulated. This information can then be collated into a brief report which can be brought to life and illustrated with quotes from students. Pro formas can also be used with larger groups as a basis for some form of *Structured Group Discussion*.

APPROACHES Typically a pro forma outlines a number of issues down the left-hand side on which students are to comment. These tend to be rather general, as the examples opposite illustrate. Sometimes there are also headings across the top which might refer to different course or teaching components, so that comparisons can be made or simply so that fairly comprehensive feedback can be gathered on the course within the same exercise.

CAVEATS As with other types of open-ended questions, student criticism may be hampered by a fear that handwriting will be identified. Reassurance from teaching staff about the course team's motives for gathering feedback and the uses to which it is to be put may be sufficient to dispel fears and encourage insightful comments. Alternatively, if the expertise were available, it might be possible to put the pro forma on-line, thereby circumventing concerns about recognising handwriting.

COURSE FEEDBACK PRO FORMAS

Example 1

1. **STRENGTHS**
What, for you, have been the strengths of the course?

2. **WEARNESSES**
And what, for you, have been its weaknesses?

3. **IMPROVEMENTS**
How could the course be improved, do you think?

Example 2

		Good things	Things Needing Improvement
About the teaching	1.		1.
	2.		2.
	3.		3.
About the course content	1.		1.
	2.		2.
	3.		3.
About yourself	1.		1.
	2.		2.
	3.		3.

Adapted from Pro formas devised by Graham Gibbs and colleagues, Oxford Brookes University

Machine-Readable Questionnaires

SUMMARY Where classes are large, the time required to key in and analyse responses from a questionnaire may seem to outweigh the benefits of using one to obtain feedback. Machine readable questionnaires provide one solution by making use of an optical mark reader (OMR) or scanner to read data directly into a data matrix ready for computerised analysis. Data entry is therefore completed in a fraction of the time, and students can be given a summary of their feedback very soon afterwards.

APPROACHES There are broadly speaking two approaches to machine readable questionnaires, and which is chosen will be determined by the resources and expertise available.

The first approach involves a fully machine-readable questionnaire, which can be designed in-house with the aid of specialist software. One such software package is designed for IBM-compatible PC's.* Since photocopying does not offer sufficient precision for optical mark reading purposes, questionnaires must either be laser-printed directly, or litho-printed from a laser-printed original. Time is needed to learn how to use the software initially, and it may still take of the order of 1-2 days to produce a customised two-page questionnaire from a typed or hand-written draft. However, it is possible to develop 'templates' which will reduce set-up time considerably, but will constrain users in the format and layout of the questionnaire they produce.

The second approach makes use of a machine-readable response sheet on which students record their responses to the questionnaire. The grid may be used for virtually any questionnaire of equivalent length and type, so multiple copies can be produced together, making the unit cost low. When the questionnaire is modified from year to year or to suit different circumstances, all that is required is that the question sheet be retyped and photocopied. However, students sometimes find it cumbersome having to transfer their responses onto a separate sheet, and there is a greater possibility of error.

CAVEATS

- technical expertise is required to produce the initial questionnaire and to operate the optical mark reader;
- there is a trade-off between simplicity of use and visual attractiveness of the questionnaire.

* Lasercad package available from Speedwell Computing Services, Granby House, 339 Stimpson Avenue, Northampton, NN1 4LR. Tel 01604 610981

EXAMPLES OF SOME OF THE QUESTION-FORMATS POSSIBLE IN MACHINE -READABLE QUESTIONNAIRES

LECTURES ON BONES (PROF BETA)

Were clearly presented	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	were very badly presented
Were well organised	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	were very badly organised
Were interesting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Were very dull
Were useful to me	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Were unhelpful to me
Made good use of handouts	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	Made poor or no use of handouts

The research project....

was very interesting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	was very boring
was very informative	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	was not informative
was very well tutored	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	was very badly tutored
was very helpfully marked	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	was marked very unhelpfully
carried far too large % course marks	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	carried far too small % of course marks

Which of the following texts did you use?		Which of the following essays did you write?	
Wooster & Jeeves	[ ]	English Humour (1900-1950)	[ ]
Laurel & Hardy	[ ]	American Humour (1900-1950)	[ ]
Smith & Jones	[ ]	TV Humour (1950-present)	[ ]

Problems with Assessment in the Course	Frequency of problem				Seriousness of problem			
	Never or almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Not at all serious	Somewhat serious	Serious	Very serious
Finding out the standard of work required	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Overall clarity of assessment requirements	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Overall workload in the course	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Amount of useful feedback	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Time needed to complete assignments	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

On-Line Questionnaires

SUMMARY A paperless form of questionnaire making use of a computer package which asks students to respond to a feedback questionnaire at a computer terminal and then feeds responses directly into a data matrix, ready for analysis.

APPLICATIONS On-line questionnaires enable feedback to be obtained from large classes in an economical and systematic way. They eliminate the onerous task of entering data into a computer. Some commercially available software packages will also carry out statistical analyses and create a report at the end, thereby saving time at each stage of the feedback process from the course organiser's point of view. Using on-line questionnaires means that teaching time need not be used for questionnaire completion since students can complete the questionnaire at a time which suits them best.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS To use on-line questionnaires, students must have access to either a mainframe computer or microlab, depending on where the questionnaire has been installed. Significant time has to be invested initially in setting the system up.

POSSIBILITIES With some computer expertise, it is possible to install on-line a questionnaire you have developed yourself. Alternatively, there are some commercially available software packages which are either designed specifically to obtain on-line course feedback, or may be modified to do so. *Question Mark*[*] is one such example. The software is designed to be adapted to the particular requirements and needs of the user and can operate on single machines, over different types of networks and over the World Wide Web. It is capable of analysing the data collected and of producing a report. In addition to gathering course feedback, Question Mark can be used for various types of assessment and testing.

CAVEATS If the on-line questionnaire is completed during an unsupervised session, the feedback exercise might be regarded as rather distant from the course, and not be viewed favourably by students. It is perhaps worth considering that most of the advantages of using on-line questionnaires lie with the department, and not with students. The exercise therefore needs to be handled sensitively.

* Question Mark Computing Ltd, 5th Floor, Hill House, Highgate Hill, London N19 5NA. Tel: (0171) 263 7575

Standard single licence costs about £499 and allows test authoring and analysis from one computer and distribution to multiple machines across a network on the same site. Lots of other types of licence are available.

AN EXTRACT FROM AN INDEPENDENTLY DEVELOPED ON-LINE QUESTIONNAIRE

One-Minute Questionnaires

SUMMARY A simple but effective way of gathering feedback from students. You stop the class a little earlier than usual and ask students to jot down their responses to one or two well-thought-out questions, which you collect as students leave.

APPLICATIONS As well as being a refreshing alternative to traditional questionnaires, and one which does not require much preparation or expertise, one-minute questionnaires are ideal for taking soundings on changes you've introduced to parts of an otherwise well-established course. They can also be used to gauge students' difficulties in understanding course material as these difficulties arise, and to encourage students to reflect on what they have learned generally.

APPROACHES Here is one description by an experienced user of one-minute questionnaires:

> Four or five times during the term I come to class two minutes early. I write two questions in the corner of the board:
>
> 1. What is the most significant thing you learned today?
> 2. What question is uppermost in your mind at the end of this class session?
>
> Then I go ahead and give a 49-minute presentation. One minute before the bell rings I tell the students to take out a piece of paper, sign it, and answer the two questions in one minute. When the bell rings I ask them to pass their papers to the aisle. I walk down the aisle and pick them up.
>
> I originally started this as a way of taking attendance and would simply give the papers to my readers to check off the names. Later I started reading the papers and they, of course, do provide excellent feedback on whether the students are understanding and whether there are important questions to which I should respond.
>
> Wilson, 1986, p.199

CAVEATS

- students may lose interest if you use the technique too often;
- students will quickly become disenchanted if there is no obvious spin-off – i.e. clear signals that you are modifying your teaching in the light of their reactions;
- one-minute questionnaires are not helpful in getting feedback on the course as a whole – unless you also use them at the end of a session (and allow more time for students to reflect).

Feedback from External Colleagues and Peers: Overview

Feedback which derives from the expertise of individuals not directly involved in a course or programme provides an essential complement to feedback from students and teaching colleagues. In some instances, feedback of this kind arises routinely from established procedures such as external examining and professional accreditation visits. In others, the outsider's view may be specifically invited by course team colleagues as one input into their periodic reappraisal of a programme of study.

External colleagues and peers are not, however, a homogeneous group: the term can cover external examiners and other academic colleagues; peers from the professions, commerce and industry; and colleagues with specialist expertise in teaching-learning strategies. Each has specific strengths to offer as sources of feedback.

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

External examiners and assessors can helpfully comment on:

- whether the curriculum is of an appropriate depth and breadth and presents an up-to-date view of the subject;
- how the standards set – and achieved, as evidenced in students' work – compare with similar programmes elsewhere;
- how well staff expertise, facilities and resources match those in other institutions.

PROFESSIONAL PEERS

Professional and industrial peers can helpfully comment on:

- the links made between theory and practice;
- whether core professional skills have been given due attention;
- to what extent a programme of study serves as a good foundation for professional practice.

EDUCATIONAL SPECIALISTS

Educational specialists can helpfully comment on:

- the appropriateness of teaching, learning and assessment methods to course and programme aims;
- the design of course materials and teaching-learning aids;
- the quality of the feedback and study guidance provided.

Here we consider three ways of eliciting feedback from external colleagues and peers: comment on course materials, external examining, and assessment and accreditation.

Comment on Course Materials

SUMMARY Inviting comment on course materials offers a straightforward and economical way of getting external feedback, particularly on aspects of course content and structure which lie outwith the expertise and experience of students.

APPLICATIONS Consultation with external colleagues about course materials can be especially helpful:

- when a new course is being planned or an existing course is undergoing a periodic reappraisal, *and when*
- a high level of subject and/or vocational expertise is essential.

APPROACHES Course materials take a variety of forms, the most important of which is the core documentation describing course aims, content and structure and outlining teaching-learning and assessment strategies. In planning or reappraising a course, the course team may wish to validate their judgements with the aid of informed external opinion, particularly for example on how well the course documentation succeeds in conveying a coherent and appropriately challenging view of contemporary theory and practice within the subject area concerned. External academic colleagues (perhaps including external examiners) can approach the core course materials from the standpoint of their knowledge of the discipline and of similar courses elsewhere, while peers from industry and the professions can in appropriate instances advise on vocational relevance.

In some instances, core course documentation can be accompanied by more specific study materials such as class handouts, worksheets, case studies and assignment questions and problems. These materials can themselves be subject to scrutiny by an external colleague, or they can serve simply as helpful background material, illustrating what the course team is trying to achieve. In either case, the course team must decide whether to invite external colleagues and peers to comment as they think appropriate or to respond to specific questions or issues, and whether comments will be sought only in writing or amplified through face-to-face contact.

ADVANTAGES

- in drawing on expertise beyond the course team, course quality may be enhanced while at the same time a measure of external accountability is secured;
- a relatively simple procedure which need not be time-consuming or expensive.

LIMITATIONS

- there will be practical constraints on the time and effort external colleagues are willing to commit;
- needs to be complemented by monitoring of the course in operation and feedback from students.

SCHOOL OF SPACE TECHNOLOGY
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
SEPT 9, 1996

- Were you given adequate information on the course aims, structure and content?

  Yes - this documentation is well in place.

- Do you consider that the course structure and content meet the needs of the students and of the aims of the course?

  I find it difficult to answer the first part of the question. There are now so many overseas students who do this as a professional qualification and who need the course to be useful and relevant to their own careers that I feel we need to do a needs analysis in order to answer this. I'm happy though that the structure and content meet with the stated course aims.

- Did the examination adequately cover the content of the course? If not, please indicate what you consider to be inadequate

  This needs to be looked at. One piece of integrative coursework (and no exam) per course cannot guarantee coverage. What we need to think about is whether full coverage within a professional qualification is necessary.

- Do you consider that the teaching methods are appropriate to the course?

  Yes. The small group approach seems to work well in encouraging discussion and a sharing of professional experiences.

- Insofar as you can assess teaching quality from the scripts and from other sources available to you, do you consider that any improvements should be made?

  Nothing obvious from the scripts.

- Do you consider the marking standards of the internal markers to be generally appropriate?

  Yes. The impressive tradition of double marking in this department seems to have paid dividends. Markers seem to work to a clear (if unwritten) set of criteria which are entirely appropriate.

Signed *Neil Armstrong* Date July, 1996

Based on University of Edinburgh, Faculty of Science and Engineering draft form

External Examiners and Assessors

SUMMARY Although their principal function is that of safeguarding academic standards, external examiners also represent an important source of expert feedback.

APPLICATIONS External examiners can be especially helpful:

- in providing an authoritative and independent view of assessment procedures and practices;
- in commenting more widely on course content and structure.

APPROACHES The external examiner system is intended to ensure comparability of standards in degrees awarded in different universities, and fairness in assessment practices.

In essence, external examiners are expected to:

- approve drafts of examination papers;
- scrutinise a representative range of assessed work (and all scripts given first class, borderline or fail marks);
- submit annual reports.

As a source of feedback, therefore, external examiners are uniquely placed to offer an expert third-party view of assessment procedures. But the role of external examiners can be widened to include comment on the structure of the degree programme and teaching methods and skills, in so far as these were apparent in students' assessed work. In practice, this wider role has increasingly been underpinned by pro forma reports which invite comment in response to a range of specific questions. Examiners' reports are now also generally made available to course teams (albeit with provision for a confidential annex) rather than, as hitherto, intended only for deans of faculty, principals or vice-chancellors.

ADVANTAGES

- external scrutiny is grounded in subject and teaching expertise;

LIMITATIONS

- there will be practical constraints on the time and effort external examiners can realistically be expected to commit;
- feedback from external examiners and assessors needs to be complemented by feedback from students.

FURTHER READING See Partington, J., Brown, G. and Gordon, G. (1993).

CHECKING A COURSE DOCUMENT: A PRO FORMA

6. Course Content		Comments
Assumptions about what knowledge, skills and attitudes the students bring are stated	☐	
What students will be expected to learn independently during course is clearly indicated	☐	
What students will be expected to learn outside the course is indicated	☐	
Relevance to possible student careers discussed	☐	
Degree to which content will be changed/updated declared	☐	
7. Course Process		
Range of teaching/learning methods described	☐	
Suitability of teaching/learning methods argued	☐	
Familiarity and competence of staff with methods confirmed	☐	
Typical experience of students on course described	☐	
8. Assessment		
Clear justification of the assessment method in the light of the aims, the client group/students and the course process	☐	
Range of assessment methods proposed	☐	
The distinction between assessment that is diagnostic, formative and summative, made clearly	☐	
Assessment criteria clearly communicated	☐	
9. Course Admin		
Committee structure spelt out	☐	
Specialist roles for staff listed	☐	
Communication procedures between students and staff are clearly delineated	☐	
10. Course Monitoring and Evaluation		
Appropriate procedures for evaluating course described	☐	
Mechanism for taking action on feedback described	☐	

* From Jacques, D. Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education by Open Learning. Module 1 Course Design (Week 3, Task 6). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development. For two other examples see Rosnow (1993) and Rowntree (1990).

Quality Assessment and Accreditation

OVERVIEW

Nowadays virtually all programmes of study in higher education are subject to external forms of scrutiny in addition to their own internal processes of quality control and quality assurance. The two commonest forms are teaching quality assessment and professional accreditation. Some higher education institutions also operate a rolling programme of departmental reviews which involve external reviewers.

TEACHING QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Teaching Quality Assessments of subject or 'cognate' areas are carried out on a regular basis by the Higher Education Funding Councils, and are designed to determine whether the teaching provided meets a satisfactory standard. At the time of writing, the arrangements for quality assessment are under review, but it seems likely that whatever new mechanisms and structures emerge, quality assessment will continue to be based on an explicit assessment framework or set of guidelines, entail a substantial element of self-assessment combined with visits by external assessors, and result in a report which is published. Over and above what can be learned both from preparing for and undergoing the process itself and from the ensuing report, therefore, those seeking feedback on courses and programmes of study can:

- consult the most up-to-date version of the published quality assessment guidelines in deciding what aspects of a course or programme might call for systematic feedback;
- study reports on other institutions offering courses in the same cognate area to find out about 'good practice' and changing practices in course design, teaching/learning methods and assessment strategies.

PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION

A large number of programmes of study which prepare students for entry into a profession and offer exemption from all or some of its qualifying examinations are subject to professional accreditation. These programmes include degrees in a wide range of fields such as Medicine, Psychology, Social Work, Accounting, Law, and the various branches of Engineering (Chemical, Civil, Electrical and Mechanical). In order to be eligible for accreditation, it is usually necessary to demonstrate periodically that the programme of study concerned meets certain requirements in terms of the knowledge, understanding, skills and values it seeks to impart, and the submission of course documentation is usually combined with a visit by a team or group nominated by the accrediting body concerned.

Since the scope and nature of accreditation processes differ considerably from one professional body to another, their potential contribution to course feedback is also variable. Generally speaking, however, they will offer an additional, if periodic, source of feedback with a strong element of externality, together with guidelines on course content and structure (and possibly also on course delivery) which may also need to be taken into account in devising appropriate feedback strategies.

FURTHER READING

See Higher Education Quality Council (1996) and Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (1996).

EXTRACT FROM A QUALITY ASSESSMENT REPORT

The full-time staff were very well qualified and generated a high level of scholarly and research output. An energetic and enthusiastic cohort of young part-time staff, drawn from practice, contributed to the well balanced complement of staff. The teaching staff were well supported by technical and secretarial staff.

9. The teaching and learning environment was clearly enriched by the extensive and high quality research activities for which the Department is noted. The academic maturity of students appeared to contribute to stimulating social intercourse between staff and students.

Teaching and Assessment

10. Teaching programmes were clearly articulated. Student handbooks provided clear and comprehensive information on all aspects of the courses and handouts given to students for lectures, seminars and design projects were well structured and helpful.

11. The pattern of teaching and learning was effectively structured to deliver a broad understanding of each subject, the appropriate range of relevant skills and specialist knowledge of particular aspects of the subject. There was ample evidence of student motivated learning and individual creativity.

12. The teaching served was effective, fully prepared and informed by scholarship and research. The delivery of teaching material was, however, largely traditional with little use made of the information technologies; computer aided design featured little in the course provision - a concern expressed by some students.

13. Assessment methods were clear and fully understood by students who were kept well informed of their performance and progress through informative feedback on both written work and design work. The Course Committee appeared responsive to feedback from students and external examining bodies.

14. The arrangements for the management and integration of practical work in the course had been a concern for the department and was being restructured as part of the new degree scheme.

Student Guidance and Support

15. The student body was highly appreciative of the Freshers Week and Faculty Fairs which provided a welcoming induction for new students. It was notable that students considered themselves not only members of the departmental community but members of the wider community of University students.

16. The mainstay of student support and guidance in the Department

Incidental Feedback

There are other sorts of information and data which ought to be considered, in conjunction with feedback findings, as an integral part of the evaluation of a course or programme of study. Some of this 'incidental feedback' will be readily to hand, and some may have to be tracked down or collated from various departmental or faculty files. In the latter case, a simple rule-of-thumb is whether on balance the effort required is going to be worthwhile. There is little point, for instance, in spending a lot of time ferreting out data that would not normally be collected if all the available indications are that a course is outstandingly well-taught and well-received.

Relevant information will include baseline performance data of at least some of the following kinds:

- students' qualifications, on entry to a programme of study;
- patterns of take-up of specific course options or combinations;
- pass, fail, transfer and dropout rates;
- merit certificates and rates of progression to honours courses;
- patterns of distribution of marks or grades and degree classifications;
- first-degree destinations, e.g. employment and postgraduate study.

Data of this sort is rarely illuminating in itself but has to be looked at in comparison with other courses and programmes. For most purposes, appraising a course or course unit will require comparisons to be made with other similar courses in the department(s) concerned, while appraising a programme of study may call for comparisons across a faculty or school. However, a more fundamental reappraisal (of the kind that might precede an external teaching quality assessment or form part of a periodic departmental review) would probably call for comparative data to be collected from similar programmes in other higher education institutions.

Other kinds of information which, though not widely collected, are sometimes instructive include:

- 'unobtrusive' measures of teaching quality such as attendance patterns, levels of student attentiveness and their readiness to commit more (or less) than usual effort to a course;
- patterns of choice in situations where students can freely select from a range of options – e.g. relative take-up of essay, report or project topics, or those test and exam questions which students most (and least) frequently opt for.

More informally but equally valuably, you might wish to find out how your course compares with others in terms of such features as: provision of course handouts and other teaching/learning materials; expectations about what (and how much) independent study students will undertake outwith formal contact hours; the kinds of guidance and support given to students in difficulty; strategies for lectures, tutorials or practicals when class sizes are especially large and resources are at a premium; the level of priority given to developing students' personal, transferable skills relative to knowledge and understanding; the use made of computing and information technology; or the ways in which the students are assessed.

Part 4: Outcomes and Action

Overview 75

Analysing Data

- Analysing Closed Questions and Answers 76
- Analysing Open Comments and Discussion 79

Interpreting Findings

- Overview 83
- Interpreting Closed Answers 84
- Interpreting Open Comments 86

Consulting on Feedback

- Unwise Moves 88
- Consulting Colleagues: Ground Rules 90

Acting on Findings

- Overview 92

Communicating Outcomes

- Overview 97
- To Students 98
- To Next-Course Colleagues 101

Outcomes and Action: Overview

INTRODUCTION As the earlier parts of this guide have shown, there is a very wide range of possibilities open to you in devising a feedback strategy for a course or programme of study. Indeed, by the time you have completed the necessary groundwork, made your choice of sources and methods, and actually collected the feedback, it is tempting to feel that the job is almost over — and so spend too little time or effort on resolving the outcomes of the feedback and the action which should arise from it.

POSSIBLE PITFALLS Common pitfalls for the unwary include, for instance:

- putting too much reliance on first impressions of the data collected, rather than systematically identifying what the feedback reveals about course or programme strengths and weaknesses;
- overlooking the desirability of involving course colleagues in the crucial task of making sense of the findings and drawing out their implications;
- not making sure that the students involved will be told what the results of the feedback were and what action is to be taken as a result.

KEY STEPS This part of the guide therefore aims to show how these potential pitfalls can be avoided. Five key aspects are explored:

- what is involved in **analysing** the feedback data, whether it takes the form of closed answers or open comments and discussion;
- what **interpreting** these analyses entails;
- who needs to be **consulted** in making sense of the findings and determining what action would be appropriate;
- what kinds of **action** might be called for, whether to tackle shortcomings revealed by the feedback or to explore specific issues more fully;
- to whom the outcomes and action should be **communicated**, and in what form.

Analysing Closed Questions and Answers*

INTRODUCTION

When feedback has been collected and is ready to be analysed, there are great virtues in having numbers to work with. Numerical feedback data (as in example A, opposite) can help to provide precise answers to questions such as how much 'or how many', e.g.

'What is the strength of student concern about workload?'

'What proportion of students found topic X particularly difficult?'

To exploit the data to full potential, however, it is not feasible to rely on 'eyeballing' – in other words, simply skimming through a pile of questionnaires to get a rough (and often misleading) impression of the pattern of students' answers. A more thorough statistical analysis is essential. Where the questionnaire is short and the number of students involved relatively small, it may be feasible – if laborious – to rely on a calculator. As a general rule, however, computerised processing is almost always desirable, and nowadays there are many user-friendly statistical packages readily available which make the task of data analysis comparatively straightforward.

FIRST STEPS

The first step is to set up a data file, which stores the questionnaire responses in numerical form. Decisions as to how incomplete or indecipherable answers are to be dealt with should also be made.

Once the data file is complete, analysis can begin. The simplest kind of analysis (see example B) would show:

- the number of students responding to each question (this may vary from question to question);
- the frequencies or response distributions for each question (i.e. how many students opted for each possible response);
- the mean or 'average' score for any given question.

Neither distributions nor means are usually sufficient by themselves: look again at example B to see how two distinctively different distributions can have almost the same mean, which in this instance lie close to the midpoint on the scale. Where, as in question 10, the distribution follows a typical pattern (the so-called 'normal curve'), the results may seem unremarkable. But where it is skewed, as in question 12, it will be important to try and find out why students contrasted so starkly in the responses they gave.

COMPARING KINDS OR GROUPS OF STUDENTS

Comparing and contrasting the responses of different groups or kinds of students – as in example C – is also desirable. These 'crosstabulations', as they are usually called, will help in establishing whether traditional or access students, say, or those with and those without an A level or Higher in the subject, reacted to the course in similar ways.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Given the wealth of options offered by most statistical software packages, it is always tempting to carry out much more complex analyses than these. But beware of overdoing things: no questionnaire is unlikely to be sufficiently tried and tested to withstand the battery of statistical techniques commonly applied to a robust research instrument. Besides, the more analyses you carry out, the more time and effort will be needed to interpret the results – and the additional work required may distract you from the more pressing task of sifting out the key findings and their practical implications for the course concerned.

* Here we can offer no more than a rudimentary guide to analysing closed questions. If you have little experience of analysing data of this kind, you are strongly advised to enlist the help of an appropriately expert colleague.

ANALYSING CLOSED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: EXAMPLES

Example A

Tick the extent to which you agree with the following:

	A lot	A little	Not at all
The workload is too heavy	78%	13%	9%

	Too heavy	Average	Too light
How did you find the workload?	12%	67%	21%

	Very	Quite	Average	Not so bad	Easy
How difficult did you find Topic 5?	19	63	14	3	1

Example B

	sa (5)	a (4)	? (3)	u (2)	su (1)
11. Course aims and objectives are clearly set out	3	17	60	18	7
n=95 Mean= ((3x5)+(4x17)+(3x60)+(2x18)+(1x7))÷95=2.99					
12. Handouts are well thought out and helpful	11	12	14	39	4
n=80 Mean=((5x11)+(4x12)+(3x14)+(2x39)+(1x4))÷80=2.94					

Example C

Entry qualifications (n= 195)

		Students with A levels	Students with Highers	Access Students	Other	Total
Perceived difficulty of course	Difficult	1	6	3	6	16
	Average	9	29	1	5	44
	Easy	10	13	2	5	30
	Total	20	48	6	16	100

Analysing Open Comments and Discussion

INTRODUCTION Feedback which takes the form of open comments and discussion material helps to answer questions such as *how?* or *in what ways?*, e.g.

> 'How do students think this course can be improved?'
>
> 'In what respects has this proved to be a difficult topic?'

Analysing open-ended comments and discussion is not necessarily time-consuming. When the method of feedback used is structured discussion, for instance, analysing and categorising the comments made is an integral part of the process. Students will have collated their reactions to a course on poster paper, perhaps, or the discussion has culminated in an agreed summary.

Just as often, nonetheless, some kind of content analysis will be required — whether all the feedback data is in the form of open comments or the task is the more contained one of capturing answers to open-ended questions in a 'mixed-mode' questionnaire.

APPROACHES The simplest approach to content analysis is to group comments by topic. A precis can be made of the comments reproduced verbatim. But sometimes topic-based analysis alone will not suffice: a more thematic analysis is needed to capture the full range of possibilities represented in the data and to present these in a digestible form.

On the page opposite, Example **A** lists a set of feedback comments in their raw form, in the order in which they were collected. Examples **B**, **C** and **D** follow on and illustrate different approaches to topic-based and thematic analysis.

If it is to be done well, content analysis calls for patient effort. The set of topic headings arrived at after a first run-through of the data almost invariably proves provisional. On closer scrutiny, some tentative topic headings are likely to prove too general, others over-refined.

CUT-AND-PASTE The process of analysis is thus an iterative one, to-ing and fro-ing between raw comments and possible topics or themes. You can however make it a more manageable one by sorting comments and cutting them into strips for ease of sorting into categories, or do an electronic screen-and-paste on a word processor (which is how Examples **A** – **D** were assembled).

HOW COULD THE COURSE BE IMPROVED?

Example A

1. Give us less set work. *I don't mind hard graft, but this is way over the top.*
2. Can't think of anything. *(It's better run than any other three courses)*
3. Why not make it a rule that all the lecturers give us good clear handouts? At the moment, some do and some don't. And of those who do, only Dr. Figgins gives us model handouts: to the point, easy to take in, and always with lots of really neat examples that help us to get what she's driving at.
4. Switch the practicals to any afternoon but Fridays ... PLEASE.
5. I think we should have assignments which are shorter but given out more often, 'cos then it's easier to keep up with all the work we've got to do.
6. Improved – in this department?? You've got to be kidding!!
7. Could someone please fix the noisy ventilator fan in Lecture Room 8?
8. It's OK as it is.
9. Take a good look at the coursework load. When things are quiet on the other courses we do (which isn't very often!), we can just about cope — but otherwise we're struggling.
10. I reckon I put a lot of effort into this course, because it interests me a lot and I'm hoping to do well in it. But all that Dr. Snodgrass had to say when he was marking my last lab report was 'C+. Middling to good'. So what I would vote for is more helpful comments on our written work.
11. This could be just as rewarding as other modules ... if only the amount of work pushed our way was more realistic. Surely there's something that could be done to make the workload lighter?
12. Better feedback. My tutor says so little about my written work I haven't a clue how I'd go about improving on the work I usually get.

In this example, the comments made by the students appear simply in the order in which they were logged. Even where, as here, the total number of comments recorded is relatively small, some form of content analysis would seem to be essential to capture their meaning accurately.

Some kind of track will also need to be established in cases (e.g. comments 3 and 10) where members of staff have been identified by name. Clearly, in Example B, the strategy followed has been to remove the name where the comment is negative (as in 10) but to leave it in where it is positive and may be helpful to other members of the course team (as in 3). Whether you adopt this or a different approach is a matter for you alone to judge.

HOW COULD THE COURSE BE IMPROVED?

Example B

General

- Can't think of anything. (It's better-run than my other three courses) [2.]
- Improved - in this department?? You've got to be kidding!!! [6.]
- It's OK as it is. [8.]

Lectures

- Why not make it a rule that all the lecturers give us good clear handouts? At the moment, some do and some don't. And of those who do, only Dr. Figaro gives us model handouts: to the point, easy to take in, and always with lots of really neat examples that help us to get what she's driving at. [3.]
- Could someone please fix the noisy ventilator fan in Lecture Room E? [7.]

Coursework

- Give us less set work. I don't mind hard graft, but this is way over the top. [1.]
- I think we should have assignments which are shorter but given out more often, 'cos then it's easier to keep up with all the work we've got to do. [5.]
- Take a good look at the coursework load. When things are quiet on the other courses we do (which isn't very often!), we can just about cope — but otherwise we're struggling. [9.]
- I reckon I put a lot of effort into this course, because it interests me a lot and I'm hoping to do well in it. But all that [the tutor] had to say when [...] marking my last lab report was "C+. Middling to good". So what I would vote for is more helpful comments on our written work. [10.]
- This could be just as rewarding as other modules ... if only the amount of work pushed our way was more realistic. Surely there's something that could be done to make the workload lighter? [11.]
- Better feedback. My tutor says so little about my written work I haven't a clue how I'd go about improving on the mark I usually get. [12.]

Other

- Switch the practicals to any afternoon but Fridays .... PLEASE. [4.]

This example shows the most basic form of content analysis: grouping the comments by topic, so that like can be compared to like. This works well enough when there are relatively few comments under each topic heading, as is the case for 'General', 'Lectures' and 'Other', but may not go far enough when - as with 'Coursework' - there are several comments and they deal with different aspects of the same topic.

Note also that the topics chosen here include both 'General' and 'Other'. Headings such as these are fine so long as they do not become a dumping ground for too many comments which are difficult to categorise. Example C overleaf suggests a more precise way of labelling 'Other'.

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HOW COULD THE COURSE BE IMPROVED?

Example C

General

- No improvements suggested (3 students)

Lectures

- Good handouts wanted from all lecturers (1 student)
- Fix noisy fan in Room E. (1 student)

Practicals

- Shift the Friday p.m. lab class (1 student)

Coursework

- Too much: need to reduce (3 students)
- Have shorter but more frequent assignments (1 student)
- Provide more helpful comments (2 students)

Example C above illustrates a pithier way of reporting an analysis, though there is inevitably a trade-off between conciseness of presentation and the time needed to precis the comments, and the richness and impact of the comments in their original form is lost.

HOW COULD THE COURSE BE IMPROVED?

Example D

COURSEWORK

a. **Review the Workload**

- Reduce the amount of work we're set. I don't mind working hard, but this is way over the top. [1.]
- Take a good look at the coursework load. When things are quiet on the other courses we do (which isn't very often!), we can just about cope — but otherwise we're struggling. [9.]
- This could be just as rewarding as other modules ... if only the amount of work pushed our way was more realistic. Surely there's something that could be done to make the workload lighter? [11.]

b. **Change the Pattern of the Workload**

- I think we should have assignments which are shorter but given out more often, 'cos then it's easier to keep up with all the work we've got to do. [5.]

c. **Improve Tutors' Feedback**

- All the tutor said on my last lab report was "C+. Middling to good". So what I would vote for is more helpful comments on our written work. [10.]
- Better feedback. My tutor says so little about my written work I haven't a clue how I'd go about improving on the mark I usually get. [12.]

In contrast to Example C, Example D preserves the original comments (in this instance, those on 'Coursework'), but groups them more thematically into the types of course improvements suggested.

Interpreting Findings: Overview

PURPOSES

Once the feedback data have been processed and the analyses are available, the next step is interpretation. The main purposes of interpretation are normally to identify:

- the main strengths of a course or programme of study, as perceived by those – students, course colleagues or external peers – providing the feedback;
- its perceived weaknesses or shortcomings;
- aspects of the course or programme which warrant further exploration, for a number of possible reasons: because the feedback results were not clear-cut, for example, or because the way in which some questions were worded turned out to be ambiguous, or because the answers given indicated that an issue was more complex than it had earlier appeared to be.

INTERPRETING IN CONTEXT

Interpreting involves studying the analyses and assessing their significance, in the context of all the available findings and against the background of the course or programme of study concerned. And since this a demanding task, it is not one which a course organiser should consider undertaking alone. Course colleagues can lend a strong helping hand in spotting contextual subtleties and bringing their different individual standpoints to bear on the feedback data.

There are at least four contexts or backgrounds which usually need to be considered. Any one item of data on a particular question or topic needs to be looked at in the context of

- all the analyses available for that particular question or topic;
- data on any other related questions or topics which formed part of the same analyses;
- data collected by other methods or from other sources of feedback;
- the aims and organisation of the course or programme of study concerned.

CLOSED AND OPEN ANSWERS

In the pages which follow, the process of interpreting feedback is illustrated in relation both to closed and to open answers to feedback questions and topics.

Interpreting Closed Answers

INTRODUCTION

The example opposite shows the results of a straightforward analysis of a course feedback questionnaire consisting of closed questions and answers. (For reasons of space, only results for some of the questions are shown here).

Since the mean 'scores' for each question are frequently used as the starting-point for interpretation, these scores have been used to rank-order the questions, as an aid to identifying course strengths and weaknesses. On this criterion alone, W and X stand out as the main strengths and Y and Z as the main weaknesses of the course. However, as the preceding 'Overview' pointed out, accurate interpretation means interpreting in-context, with at least four aspects to be considered.

INTERPRETING-IN-CONTEXT

First, we need to look carefully at each item of data in relation to all the other data available on that particular question or topic - in this case, by scrutinising frequency distributions and non-response rates as well as mean scores. And what we find here when we look at distributions suggests that, by itself, the middling 'score' for V may be misleading. The percentage of strong disagreement indicates that V may also be a perceived weakness of the course, at least as far as some students are concerned. (And we could of course use other questionnaire data on students' backgrounds to probe). Similarly a close look at response rates is also instructive: is it reasonable to treat X as a main strength of the course when less than one-third of the students answered this question?

Second, we need to consider the results for each question in relation to the results for other related questions or topics. What this reveals, as far as the example opposite is concerned, also invites fresh thinking: is Z so obviously a weakness of the course when viewed alongside the answers to question U?

Third, we shall need to reflect on these findings in the light of feedback from other methods or sources – in this case, in the light of students' open comments in the same questionnaire. What emerges (see overleaf, p. 87) does not, on this occasion, prompt a reappraisal of the closed-answer findings, although some of the comments (e.g. 23, 25, 26 and 39) seem helpful in throwing light on students' answers to question T.

Fourth, the data have to be considered against the background of course aims and organisation for their full significance to be appreciated. Many course teams would be content with the results for question S, for instance – unless perhaps they had spent a great deal of time revising and enlarging the previous year's course materials and so were expecting students to react very positively. Or to take a different example, the identification of Y as a weakness might cause little concern where it had been given little priority as a course aim, but equally, it might lead to a thoroughgoing rethink if it stimulated the course team into reviewing priorities.

INTERPRETING CLOSED ANSWERS: AN EXAMPLE

SA=Strongly Agree 5, A=Agree 4, NSF=No Strong Feelings3, D=Disagree 2, SD=Strongly Disagree 1

RANK by mean score	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	MEAN SCORE	DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS (%)	% OF STUDENTS RESPONDING
1	W. Course aims and objectives were clearly spelt out.	4.3	SA 31 A 33 NSF 32 D 4 SD 0	100
2	X. The tutor(s) gave me helpful comments on my written work.	4.1	SA 39 A 42 NSF 14 D 3 SD 1	29
3	U. The various parts of the course (lectures/tutorials/practicals/self-study, etc.) linked together well.	3.6	SA 33 A 29 NSF 14 D 14 SD 10	98
4	S. The course handouts/study materials deepened my understanding of the subject-matter of the course.	3.3	SA 17 A 36 NSF 23 D 19 SD 5	100
5	V. The course did not make unreasonable demands on my existing knowledge and skills.	3.1	SA 34 A 14 NSF 7 D 17 SD 28	77
6	T. I was given clear guidance on what was expected of me in practicals.	2.9	SA 12 A 22 NSF 19 D 34 SD 13	96
7	Z. It was a well-structured course.	2.4	SA 13 A 14 NSF 21 D 25 SD 27	100
8	Y. The availability of computing/audio-visual facilities was adequate.	1.9	SA 9 A 2 NSF 17 D 40 SD 32	87

Interpreting Open Comments

INTRODUCTION

Here we illustrate some of the issues involved in interpreting open comments and discussion with an example taken from part of a 'Post-It' display of feedback. The students concerned had already completed the questionnaire we have just considered on the previous page, and the 'Post-It' exercise was intended to complement the questionnaire by giving the students an opportunity to voice their own reactions and concerns to the same course.

The students had been asked to respond to a simple open-ended question: "What features of the course did you particularly like / dislike?". For ease of reference, the students' comments reproduced in the example opposite have been numbered.

INTERPRETING-IN-CONTEXT

Interpreting open comments and discussion in context entails applying similar ground-rules to those followed in interpreting closed comments. Firstly, for example, we need to look at the comments in relation to other data on the same topic – in this instance, by relating comments on practicals (23, 25, 26 and 39) to the students' answers to question 7 in the questionnaire. And what we find is that the Post-It comments are helpful in clarifying why, in the questionnaire, the overall response of the students was not very favourable. The comments suggest that the various demonstrators differed widely in their capacity or readiness to assist the students.

Secondly, interpreting in context means relating the comments made to the wider course aims. A dislike of tutorials (in comment 23) would therefore be viewed in the light of the priority given by the course team to the promotion of discussion skills.

WEIGHING COMMENTS

However, interpreting in context poses a particular problem as far as open comments and discussion are concerned. How much weight should be given to such comments made when, however strongly felt or illuminating they may be, they nonetheless amount to the views of only a fraction of the number of students taking the course?

There is unfortunately no straightforward answer to this question. It is a matter for judgment by the course team. The following points however can be borne in mind:

- where feedback takes the form of open comments and discussion, the strength of student opinion often matters less than the light the comments throw on why students reacted as they did; the feedback on practicals in the example opposite is a case in point.
- in instances where gauging the strength of student opinion would be important (in relation to comment 23, for example), we can try to consider whether the comment(s) reflect a very personal or even idiosyncratic response, and might thus be discounted.
- there is always the option of gauging opinion more accurately by exploring issues further with the students themselves.

INTERPETING OPEN COMMENTS: AN EXAMPLE

Q C.4 WHAT FEATURES OF THE COURSE DID YOU PARTICULARLY LIKE / DISLIKE?

23. There were two things I really disliked: (i.) tutorials, because you were forced to join in the discussion whether you wanted to or not (ii.) the practicals – we were all over the place till we realised that the "demonstrator" hadn't got a clue either and we just had to make the best of it.

24. What I liked most were the handouts ... great for revision !!!

Dislikes? Nothing, surprisingly!

25. Practicals really good – for once. Liked most the way our lab demonstrator gave us time at beginning to read thro' the instructions & see if we had any queries she could sort out for us.

26. LIKED :- Practicals. The demonstrator was a great guy who gave you as much help as you needed

DISLIKED:- The 'Formula One' lecturing style of Dr. Hill. (Must be a close relative of Damon's?) No time for decent notes.

39. The Group III practical classes really knocked me off. We had two changes of demonstrator in the first term alone, and none of them were much cop when you actually got stuck.

40. Personally I was pretty happy with almost everything except the 2nd half of the Spring term. But I'm not sure whether anyone could breathe life into such an inherently dull topic!

Consulting on Feedback: Unwise Moves

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to make an unwise move in interpreting – and in acting upon – feedback. Sometimes feedback data can be uncomfortably challenging to course teams, and therefore needs to be presented and shared in a way which will not simply put colleagues' backs up but rather stimulate constructive discussion. At other times, what seemed at first glance to be the obvious interpretation turns out later to be a misjudgment based on insufficient background information.

SOME UNWISE MOVES

Consulting on findings and action is therefore essential if you are to avoid any 'unwise moves', which may include the following:

a. Widely circulating raw results (including data which relates to individual's teaching contributions) without first having obtained everyone's agreement to do so;

b. Dwelling on the identified weaknesses of a course or programme without also taking stock of its perceived strengths;

c. Attributing lower than expected ratings to the shortcomings of individual teachers, without first considering alternative explanations, e.g.:

- inadequate briefing of staff and / or students;
- an especially challenging topic;
- cramped facilities;
- poorly maintained equipment.

d. Not following up and clarifying with students issues which don't come across clearly in the feedback data, yet which are evidently causing them some concern;

e. Deciding to take no action on the grounds that 'the course doesn't come out of it too badly', or because 'it's unnecessary now that the students have been given a chance to let off some steam'.

CONSEQUENCES AND OPTIONS

On the facing page each of these 'unwise moves' is linked to some of the negative consequences which are likely to ensue, while overleaf are ground-rules for a more secure approach to consulting colleagues on feedback.

Consulting with students at this particular stage is a much more discretionary option. In some instances, exploring feedback issues further with students can form an integral part of the follow-up action taken by a course team. In other cases, the feedback method used – if it was, say, a student panel or structured discussion – will have made it possible to clarify issues with students at the time when they were raised.

UNWISE MOVES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Unwise Move	Likely Negative Consequences
a. *Widely circulating raw results without prior agreement*	• seen as unethical breach of confidentiality and unprofessional • views mistrust • risks alienating colleagues by putting them on the defensive
b. *Dwelling on weaknesses without also taking stock of strengths*	• process seen as merely fault finding • danger of magnifying (and becoming over-preoccupied with) the weaknesses of a course, while at the same undervaluing its demonstrated virtues
c. *Attributing lower-than-expected ratings to the shortcomings of individuals teachers, without first considering alternative explanations*	• alienates particular colleagues • undermines any sense of shared problems or a genuinely team-based approach to the course • difficulties wrongly diagnosed – and so unaddressed
d. *Not following up issues which don't come across clearly in the feedback data, but are causing students concern*	• risks misinterpreting data or undervaluing its significance • students begin to doubt the motives of the staff, become disenchanted
e. *Deciding to taking no action because the course doesn't come out of it too badly or it's enough that students have 'let off some steam'*	• students become disenchanted and question whether providing feedback is worth their while • complacency deepens within the course team, course goes downhill fast

Consulting Colleagues: Ground Rules

INTRODUCTION

As the 'action moves' sketched out on the previous page suggest, some hard thinking is necessary on how feedback is going to be interpreted and acted upon in a way which ensures that course team colleagues are adequately consulted. What therefore follows are some ground rules you might like to consider. The example on the facing page provides a practical illustration.

SOME POSSIBLE GROUND RULES

- Circulate the findings, agree a date and time for a meeting to discuss them, and invite colleagues to comment beforehand if they wish.
- Circulate the main findings to the full course team. Those whose role is a limited one (e.g. lab demonstrators or postgraduate tutors) should at least be given an opportunity to see – and comment on – the results for that part of the course with which they are directly concerned.
- Where feedback relates to an individual's contribution to a course (e.g. lectures given by one colleague, or data on each tutorial group), secure the circulation of that material to the individual(s) concerned, unless everyone has formally agreed to the data being made more widely available.
- Unless the data set is small or the course team few in number, it will probably be helpful if the findings are accompanied by general notes and observations drafted by the course organiser and any other colleagues closely involved in the feedback exercise.
- Any notes and observations ought not to offer an open-and-shut interpretation. Colleagues can and should be asked to comment on (a) course strengths and weaknesses as suggested by the data, (b) areas of uncertainty meriting further investigation, (c) implications for action, including what options might be feasible.
- Prior to or during the meeting, you may also need to discuss the following:

  whether other kinds of feedback among routinely (non-established procedures (e.g. staff-student consultative committees, external examiners' reports, course team interactions) are going to be considered simultaneously or reviewed on other occasions;

  what summary of the findings and of any action being taken needs to be communicated to students and to others (e.g. a Board of Studies, the external examiner);

  what has been learnt from the exercise which might inform future feedback strategies.

PRELIMINARY REPORT TO COURSE TEAM

Example 9

To: All teaching staff, Course 2340

From: Lyn Jones

Thank you for your help with getting the questionnaires filled in and returned. The response rate might have been a little higher but at 83% it's more than satisfactory.

Now that the questionnaires have been processed, I've been going over the data (attached) with Liz and Barry, as the Section A and B coordinators. What follows is our own first go at making sense of the data, and we'd welcome hearing your reactions at the next Course Team Meeting on Thursday 28th – or before then, in writing or over the phone, if you've time.

A. Course Strengths

The bulk of the students evidently see our great virtues as:

i. aims clearly specified and communicated – though 27% question how much emphasis we put on the historical evolution of the subject;

ii. teaching quality generally high and new course handbook praised to the skies ('terrific', 'helped enormously', 'wish all my courses had one', etc.);

iii. the coursework 'exam balance' – but see concerns about comments below.

B. Mixed Messages?

The feedback on the new tutorial arrangements (see p. 3) isn't easy to interpret. Roughly 1 in 4 think it's fine, a similar number seem to feel pretty strongly it hasn't worked, and the rest don't express firm views either way.

Could we ask everyone to raise this with their tutorial groups in a bit?

C. Course Weaknesses

After last year's ructions, it's good to see that the handbook has now come up trumps – a tribute to all the hard work that went into redrafting it over the spring and summer. This time round, three issues seem to be causing concern:

i. the new Friday afternoon lecture slot … no surprise there!!!!

ii. some lectures out of phase with practicals, esp. in Section B of the course

iii. 1 in 3 of the students (see p. 4) are dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of comments on their written work by tutors (largely the postgrad tutors).

D. Some Questions to Ponder

1. Are there any important course strengths, weaknesses or mixed messages we've overlooked in the feedback data?

2. What should we/could we do about what the students tell us the weaker aspects of the course?

   The first thoughts that Barry, Liz and I had were:

   - we can take up the Friday p.m. slot with the Faculty Office but the chances of getting it changed are pretty slim, we suspect;
   - we could try and tackle the phasing problem by (a) increasing the size of the practicals groups by 20% (again!), and run all the practicals on a Monday–Thursday basis, or (b) run all the practicals a week later … which means dropping one [which?] of the week's topics, or (c) try to circumvent the problem by enlarging the handbook or directing the students to the relevant parts of the textbook;
   - we should probably consider either running a briefing for the postgrad tutors on commenting on coursework, or perhaps pairing them up with lecturing staff when they mark the first assignment.

Acting on Findings: Overview

INTRODUCTION Acting on findings is an integral part of the feedback process. There is no point in expending a great deal of effort on getting and analysing feedback if you have no intention of doing anything about what the findings reveal. But nor is anything to be gained from action for action's sake, and you may perhaps find that the course is in the best of health and ought not be tampered with at present.

FIRST STEPS It is far more likely however that, like most courses, yours will have its strengths and its weaknesses. The strengths (some of which may surprise you) are unlikely to call for any action but do need to be acknowledged. The weaknesses, on the other hand, and the issues they raise, will require careful consideration. It's obviously worthwhile trying to differentiate between:

- issues which are so pressing that prompt remedial action is essential;
- issues which do not necessarily call for swift action (and may in fact warrant an extended period of time if they are to be adequately dealt with);
- issues about which little can realistically be done in the foreseeable future (e.g. problems arising from constraints on resources, timetabling bottlenecks or pressures on facilities or equipment);
- issues which will need to be more fully explored to clarify the nature or source of the difficulty.

REVIEWING OPTIONS Where action is called for, try to weigh options. There is usually more than one way of tackling any given issue, and generating alternatives makes it possible to consider which option or combination of options would best address other constraints such as the time, effort and expertise readily to hand.

In the pages which follow, we present examples of issues arising from feedback and outline some different ways of tackling these issues or, where appropriate, exploring them further to seek greater clarification.

SEEKING ADVICE Evaluating findings and reviewing possible lines of action is not something to be undertaken by the course organiser alone. Course team colleagues can be enormously helpful in evaluating feedback findings and exploring alternative lines of action. And sometimes expertise from outwith the course team is beneficial – for example, when teaching methods or assessment procedures have become stuck in a rut, and an injection of fresh ideas is needed.

ACTING ON FINDINGS

ISSUES RAISED IN FEEDBACK	POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION	POSSIBLE FURTHER EXPLORATION
Feedback from structured group discussion backed by informal comments from some course tutors) indicates that some students are finding it hard to meet deadlines in the 2nd term when their workload across different options 'bunches'	Assist students in managing their workload more effectively by (1) informing them of all coursework requirements and deadlines at the start of the term/ year; (2) collecting them advice on how best to organise their time	Try to establish whether the problem is widespread or only affects certain combinations of options.
	Offer students the opportunity of choosing between deadlines as well as topics.	Check workload and deadlines in other options and assess whether scope exists for some rescheduling.
	Review adequacy of library stocks of multiple copies of essential coursework reading.	
External examiner suggests that students may sometimes be getting high marks for reproducing lecture notes and programme course materials rather than engaging sufficiently in critical and independent thought.	Course team undertakes a review of assessment methods, types of questions or problems set, and how marking criteria are applied and interpreted.	Make this a priority agenda item for the next full meeting of the course team, and invite colleagues to draft short discussion papers.
	Course organiser consults with course colleagues on whether a major reappraisal of course aims and objectives and of teaching/ learning strategies is called for.	Explore further with students, via student panels or tutorial/ practical groups or structured discussion.
	Course team resolves to flag this as a key question to be considered by internal and external assessors at a forthcoming Degree Programme Review.	

ACTING ON FINDINGS - CONTINUED

ISSUES RAISED IN FEEDBACK	POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION	POSSIBLE FURTHER EXPLORATION
The results of a course feedback questionnaire show that most students would prefer more didactic teaching and lecture handouts designed to aid exam revision.	Set aside some tutorial or lab class time to explore how well students have grasped what is expected of them as learners.	Take no action on the grounds that some discontent was to be expected: the students have to be weaned from an over-reliance on didactic teaching and takeaway notes. Course team resolves to review whether its assessment methods are appropriate to a course designed to promote critical thinking and independent study. Course team discusses whether a more gradual weaning process would be realistic.
The report which follows a visit by the professional accreditation body observes that there is potential scope for forging stronger links between the worlds of theory and contemporary professional practice.	Course organiser sets up a small working group to collate information on existing opportunities for students to relate theory and practice, and to review these.	Course team is sceptical about whether more could or should be done, but resolves (a.) to include additional items on this issue in the next course feedback questionnaire; (b.) to look at the feasibility of surveying a sample of past graduates of the course.
Following a recent and rapid growth in student numbers, student reps report at a staff-student consultative meeting their difficulties in getting sufficient help from tutors during large-group problem-solving classes.	Course team discusses possible benefits of more explicit guidance to students on (1.) preparatory work in advance of the classes; (2.) what they should do if they're 'stuck'. Course organiser suggests that classes might be restructured so that students are encouraged to give more help to one another. With the assistance of the Teaching-Learning Advisory Centre, the course organiser scans published material on 'Teaching Large Classes' in search of other possible strategies.	Ensure that all the tutors responsible for the large-group problem-solving classes have had an opportunity to express their views.

ACTING ON FINDINGS - CONTINUED

ISSUES RAISED IN FEEDBACK	POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION	POSSIBLE FURTHER EXPLORATION
At a course team meeting, colleagues responsible for 2nd term lectures voice their disquiet about low student attendance rates.	Take no action on the grounds that attendance at lectures is not mandatory ... ... but keep a watchful eye on students' assessed work to verify whether standards are at risk.	Seek further feedback from students to try to ascertain whether the drop in attendance is linked specifically to the quality of the 2nd term lectures or is a more general phenomenon.
Some postgraduate tutors alert course organiser to their uncertainty about granting students extensions to deadlines.	If appropriate, draft new guidelines for staff and students. If uncertainty persists, introduce a logging system to ensure that the course organiser is kept informed and that practice is consistent.	Canvass all tutors to establish how widespread is uncertainty about practice in granting extensions ... ... and to determine whether the problem is serious enough to warrant more than simply clarifying current policy.
External examiner echoes concerns also raised in student panels about a possible lack of consistency in marking standards across different course units in the Honours programme.	Course team meets to review pattern of distributions of marks for each course unit. Course organiser asks colleagues routinely to submit profile of marks distributions alongside each set of marks conveyed to him/her. Course team reviews marking criteria and drafts guidelines for tutors and students. Course team meets periodically to assess jointly a cross-section of students' coursework and examination scripts.	Consider pursuing with external examiner, to verify whether the concern is a general one or whether specific course units can be pinpointed.

ACTING ON FINDINGS - CONTINUED

ISSUES RAISED IN FEEDBACK	POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION	POSSIBLE FURTHER EXPLORATION
A breakdown of questionnaire results by tutorial group reveals unacceptably large differences in levels of students' satisfaction with the conduct of tutorials.	Course organiser reviews questionnaire findings to check whether student satisfaction is associated with particular groups of tutors (e.g. more/less strongly marked amongst postgraduate tutors).	Course organiser resolves to treat the matter confidentially, and discusses with each of those tutors with the least favourable ratings their perspective on the findings and their thoughts on how student satisfaction might be increased.
	Course organiser proposes mounting a half-day workshop for tutors, to share ideas about best practice and to forge more unified strategies for the conduct of tutorials.	The course team is invited to review the adequacy of arrangements for briefing tutors, and to consider the desirability of a more structured approach using a common set of preprinted tutorial materials.

Communicating Outcomes: Overview

INTRODUCTION

Here we consider what is involved in communicating the *outcomes* of feedback – i.e. not simply the findings but also the action taken in response to the findings.

As with almost any aspect of communication, the main questions which arise are:

- to whom should these outcomes be communicated, and why?
- in what form(s) are they best communicated?

Overleaf we explore what is entailed in:

- communicating feedback outcomes to students;
- communicating feedback outcomes to academic and professional colleagues outwith the course team itself.

RULES-OF-THUMB

Before focussing on these two key audiences in turn, it is worthwhile outlining some broad rules-of-thumb which could be applied to any target-group beyond the immediate course team.

First, be selective: aim for a succinct summary which provides no more information than is necessary. This might mean highlighting the core findings (e.g. the main strengths and weaknesses of the course as identified in the feedback) and the action being taken.

Second, try to resist the temptations of spurious accuracy (e.g. not "31.89% of students ..." but rather "32% of students" or even better "almost one-third" or "1 in 3 students...")

Third, make use of graphic aids such as bar charts and pie charts. Most statistical software enables you to do this with the minimum of effort.

Communicating Outcomes to Students

CURRENT STUDENTS

A priority for any course team and its course organiser has to be to communicate the outcomes of feedback to the students who actually provided the feedback (called here, for ease of reference, 'current students').

Doing so seems a matter of good sense as well as common courtesy, yet students frequently complain that they are expected to spend time providing feedback but are then kept in the dark about what the findings were or how, if at all, these were being acted upon. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that students become disenchanted and increasingly reluctant to provide feedback conscientiously.

When feedback outcomes are not communicated back to students, a reason often given is that, by the time the end-of-course feedback data has been discussed and acted upon, the students concerned have moved on to other courses and no longer have a material interest in the outcomes. In fact, there are at least three ways of surmounting this particular obstacle:

- whenever possible, avoid *only* collecting feedback at the end of a course, for it suggests to current students that staff have little interest in dialogue with them about their needs, and that nothing will or can be done to address shortcomings while the course is in progress;
- where end-of-course feedback is unavoidable, look for ways of at least providing the students with a progress report, whether via a noticeboard or in the form of a handout. **Example X** opposite shows the feasibility of this even when follow-up action has not been resolved;
- try to make at least some use of methods (structured discussion, Post-It notes and so on) in which feedback is collected and collated at one and the same time;
- communicate outcomes to *prospective* as well as current students.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

There is a compelling case for ensuring that feedback outcomes are routinely conveyed to prospective students (i.e. students who will be taking the course in the following session) . First, it offers a simple means by which a course team can underscore its commitment to seeking and acting upon feedback. And second, it demonstrates to students that committing effort to providing feedback is worth their while.

Example Y (p.100) illustrates what can be done in the form of an entry in a course prospectus or handbook.

INTERIM REPORT ON FEEDBACK EXERCISE TO STUDENTS

Example X

To: All students, Course 234b
From: Lyn Jones

INTERIM REPORT ON THE COURSE FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your help with the course feedback questionnaire. Well over 80% of the year group returned completed questionnaires.

Now that the questionnaires have been processed, I'm able to give you an interim report on our progress in interpreting the findings. (A full set of results for the questionnaire has been put up on the Departmental notice-board, if you'd like to look at the data in more detail.)

Strengths of the Course	Weaknesses of the Course
clear aims	tutors' comments on coursework (1 in 3 of you)
teaching quality generally high	phasing of lectures & practicals esp. in Part B
new course handbook	stress on history of subject (1 in 4 of you)
the coursework/exam balance	the Friday p.m. lecture slot

Views on the new tutorial arrangements were divided: some of you felt they had worked, some felt they hadn't, and the rest of you didn't have strong feelings either way.

Action Being Taken

1. The next meeting of the Course Committee (on 29th of next month) will be discussing various ways of tackling the lectures/practicals phasing problem — suggestions from class reps will be warmly welcomed. The Committee will also be looking at the question of comments on coursework, and whether fuller briefing of postgrad tutors might help.

2. In the meantime could I ask you to spend a few minutes at your next tutorial discussing with your tutor your reactions to the new tutorial arrangements? We need to throw a bit more light on this aspect of the questionnaire results.

3. I have also been in touch with the Faculty Office to see whether there is any possibility of changing the Friday p.m. lecture slot, but I should warn you that, realistically, the chances of getting it changed are pretty slim. You'll not be surprised to hear that the other departments in the Faculty aren't exactly queuing up to nab lecture slots on Friday afternoons!

COURSE HANDBOOK ENTRY

Example Y

Course 123

Taking Feedback Seriously

As a Department, we warmly welcome feedback on all of our courses from everyone involved: the students taking a course, the teaching staff who make up the course team, and expert colleagues from within and outwith the University responsible for reviewing or assessing the course.

In this part of the Handbook, we summarise last year's feedback on Course 123 and outline what steps have been taken as a result.

MAIN FINDINGS

- A four-year analysis of marks showed that the numbers of students taking the course who had achieved distinctions was one-third higher than the overall average for the Faculty. The excellence of students' assessed work was also singled out for comment by the External Examiner.
- Students consistently praised the course for its clear aims, high-quality teaching and the balance and variety of its assessment methods.
- Last year's introduction of a course handbook was warmly welcomed by the students and the course team, and commended in the annual report of the Faculty Course Review Board.
- Student course reps had also commented enthusiastically on the help and guidance given by staff to students learning to use statistical software packages in the Microlab.
- Feedback had shown, however, that most students would have welcomed fuller comments on their written work, and especially on the 1st and 2nd assignments.
- Neither students nor demonstrators were happy with the phasing of lectures and practicals in Term 2.

CHANGES TO THE COURSE

The department has made two changes to this year's course in response to the concerns expressed:

- when marking coursework, tutors will complete a standardised 'comments form' indicating how well a student has met the main assessment criteria used in the course (see p. 14).
- since pressures on lab space have made it impracticable to improve the phasing of lectures and practicals, the course handbook has been expanded to include guidelines for each practical and summaries of the linked lectures.

A further and equally welcome change to this year's course is the installation of six additional workstations in the Microlab. The new workstations will be available on an open-access basis to all students taking the course.

ACCREDITATION VISIT

You may also like to note that the Department will be undergoing a 'professional accreditation visit' by the Institute for Piscatological Education midway through Term 2. A draft of the documentation the Department has to submit to IPE will be circulated to class reps for comment towards the end of Term 1.

SOURCES OF FEEDBACK

Last year's feedback on Course 123 came in the following ways:

a. a series of short questionnaires completed by students at the end of each of the five main sections of the course.

b. twice-termly liaison meetings attended by the senior members of the course team and one student rep. from each of the 12 tutorial groups.

c. two meetings (biennial) of the Departmental Staff-Student Consultative Committee (with one rep. from Course 123).

d. the Department's own course-by-course analysis of marks awarded over a four-year period.

e. the written reports of the two external examiners (received on 7 and 22 August)

f. comments by the Faculty Course Review Board on last year's Course Monitoring Report for Course 123.

Feedback on this year's course will be sought in broadly the same way, but with the addition of an open discussion (to which all students taking the course are warmly invited) in the last week of Term 1.

Nominations for student reps will be sought via tutorial groups at the 2nd tutorial of Term 1.

Communicating Outcomes to Non-Course Colleagues

INTRODUCTION

The outcomes of feedback will probably also have to be communicated to academic and professional colleagues beyond those directly involved as members of the course team. These 'non-course' colleagues comprise two groups: those within and those outwith your institution.

INTERNAL COLLEAGUES

Within your institution, there is likely to be a requirement that feedback outcomes are conveyed (generally in a standardised form) to a departmental – or more probably school, faculty or university – body with responsibilities for course monitoring and review. In Part 2, an illustration was given of one such Course Monitoring pro forma, and the example opposite shows how the end-of-course appraisal, which makes up Part B of this pro forma, was completed in the case of a course in Geology and Geophysics

EXTERNAL COLLEAGUES

Outwith the institution, those with a potential interest in learning about feedback outcomes are likely to be:

- external examiners;
- professional accreditation bodies;
- those responsible for the quality assessment of teaching.

As far as external examiners are concerned, there are good grounds for making it a matter of routine to forward to them information about feedback outcomes, though some thought will need to be given to how this can be done in a way that avoids information overload.

In the case of professional accrediting bodies and teaching quality assessors, a rather different approach is called for, since whatever information they seek will need to be provided as part of a wider package of documentation submitted in preparation for a periodic review visit. There are two options you might consider.

One is to put in place the kind of general description of departmental feedback policy and practice which was illustrated on the page opposite. This can obviously be updated from time to time, as the need arises, as well as circulated to students or displayed on notice-boards.

The other is to set up course and departmental files in which feedback materials, findings and outcomes are systematically stored. This will make it a relatively simple task, prior to accreditation or assessment, to pick out relevant examples of 'good practice' to include in visit documentation. Assessment and accreditation teams can also be offered access to the files if they wish. In either case, needless to say, you will need to make sure that the files do not contain information which relates to individual members of staff or students, and which therefore should remain strictly confidential.

QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGIES

Faculty of Science and Engineering

Course Monitoring

Part B - End of Course Appraisal

Session 1990-91 Title of Course GEOPHYSICS 2

Code number 855A No. of students enrolled (at 1 November or 1 march) 30

Course Organiser DR. J. BLOGGS Department / Division GEOLOGY & GEOPHYSICS

1. SOURCES OF FEEDBACK OBTAINED

a. How have the views of those involved in teaching the course (including, where appropriate, demonstrators and part-time tutors) been sought and taken into account by the course organiser?

☑ Individual consultation ☐ Written submissions ☑ Group discussion

☐ Other (please specify).....

b. What methods have been used to obtain feedback from students? (Please tick as appropriate)

☑ Questionnaires ☑ Group discussion ☑ Staff-student committee

☐ Other (please specify).....

c. From what other sources, where appropriate, has feedback been obtained?

☑ External examiners ☐ Employers ☐ Professional accrediting body

☐ Other (please specify).....

2. SCOPE OF FEEDBACK

On what aspects of the course had feedback been sought, and from whom?

	Teaching staff	Students	External examiners	Others
Course Content and Structure	☑	☑	☑	☐
Teaching-Learning Methods	☑	☑	☑	☐
Guidance and Support to Students	☐	☑	☑	☐
Assessment Methods	☑	☑	☑	☐
Course Organisation and Administration	☑	☑	☑	☐
Other (please specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. SYNOPSIS OF FEEDBACK

In the light of your evaluation of the feedback received from teaching staff, students, the external examiner(s) and others:

a. what appear to be the main strengths of the course?

The students' response to the course was generally very favourable. They found the content of the course very interesting, and in general related favourably to the way in which they were taught, involving practicals and field measurements. The main strength is undoubtedly the interest of the subject matter.

b. which aspects of the course need to be strengthened or improved? How will this be done, and when?

Students felt that the presentation of the seismology lectures could be improved, and that the tutorial system was insufficiently structured. There was also some lack of consistency in application of deadlines for practical marking.

Action: The seismology syllabus has been revised. A structured tutorial system based on problem sheets supplied by lecturers has been introduced. Deadlines for practical submission are clearly stated in the course handbook. CWA % has been increased from 20 to 30%.

4. DISSEMINATION

Have the results of the feedback, together with any action planned, been communicated to the following?

- ✓ The Head of Department
- ✓ The teaching staff
- ☐ The students who provided feedback
- ✓ The following year's students
- ☐ The external examiner(s)
- ☐ Others (e.g. employers, accrediting body)

Signature of Course Organiser *J.Bloggs* Date *17/1/96*

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Rowntree, D. (1990). *Teaching Through Self-Instruction: How to Develop Open Learning Materials*. London: Kogan Page, 334-338.

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Wilson, K.L., Lizzio, A. and Ramsden, P. (in press). 'The development, validation and application of the Course Experience Questionnaire'. *Studies in Higher Education*.

Wilson R.C. (1986). 'Improving faculty teaching: effective use of student evaluations and consultations'. *Journal of Higher Education*, 57.2, 196-211.

Further Reading

Amongst a large and growing literature, the following can be highly recommended:

Angelo, T.A. and Cross, K.P. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques. A Handbook for College Teachers.* Second Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 427 pp, ISBN 1 55542 500 3.

This readable book primarily focusses on assessing students' course-related knowledge, skills and understanding, though many of the techniques can readily be adapted for obtaining feedback on teaching or courses. Some fifty pages are devoted specifically to obtaining feedback. Each technique is rated in terms of the time and energy required for it and the broad description is supported by a step-by-step procedure, a list of pros and cons and suggestions for how it can be adapted or extended.

Gibbs, G. et al (1988). *53 Interesting Ways to Appraise your Teaching.* Bristol: Technical and Educational Services Ltd 937 Ravenswood Road, Bristol, BS6 6BW), 170 pp, ISBN 0 947885 25 0.

A down-to-earth, practical guide, designed to encourage you to dip into strategies that attract your attention and try them out in your everyday teaching. Covers questionnaires, interviews and discussion, video and audio recordings and help from colleagues, as well as the collection of evidence on your teaching for appraisal purposes.

O'Neil, M. and Pennington, G. (1992). *Evaluating Teaching and Courses from an Active Learning Perspective.* Module 12 in the series *Effective Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.* Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals Universities' Staff Development Unit (now UCoSDA): University of Sheffield.

A comprehensive set of materials comprising a self-instructional guide to evaluating teaching and courses, examples and exemplars of practical approaches to feedback and evaluation, and workshop materials designed to help staff developers promote good practice.

Partington, P. (Ed) (1993). *Student Feedback - Context, Issues and Practice.* Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals Universities' Staff Development Unit (now UCoSDA): University of Sheffield.

A loose-leaf step-by-step guide to student feedback which includes sections addressing why to gather feedback, what feedback might focus on, how it might be gathered, interpreting and responding to feedback, and using feedback for quality assurance.

Ramsden, P. and Dodds, A. (1989). *Improving Teaching and Courses: A Guide to Evaluation.* 2nd edition, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Parkville, Victoria, Australia, 3052, 64 pp., ISBN 0 86839 997 3.

Intended to help teaching staff in higher education institutions to improve their courses and their teaching, this compact handbook is concerned with good practice in collecting and making use of diagnostic information. Though some questionnaires and checklists are included, the emphasis is on exploring possibilities rather than presenting a wide range of resource materials. There is welcome attention to ground-rules, including ten rules to be followed when questionnaires are used to gather feedback on teaching.

No course or study programme in higher education can make a convincing claim to high quality without systematic and regular use of feedback from students, from external colleagues and peers, and from within the course team itself.

This handbook is designed to help university and college teachers make use of course feedback in the most appropriate, constructive and economical ways possible, drawing on a large variety of examples of contemporary good practice.

It deals with the various complementary sources of feedback and outlines the many possible methods which can be adopted. At the same time, it considers feedback in-the-round, exploring how relevant information about the impact of courses and programmes of study can be systematically identified, obtained, analysed, interpreted, acted upon and disseminated.

The handbook was written and compiled with the financial support of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council's Staff Development Initiative.

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